

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA

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16

SNOW WHITE'S SLUMBER

「雪姫様は、今も眠っていますか？」
「はい、まだです。でも、そろそろ目覚めるかもしれません。」
「それなら、私も一緒に目覚めようと思います。」





HIMA

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SNOW WHITE'S SLUMBER

[illegible]

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**SNOW WHITE'S
SLUMBER**

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**





"Well,
we've
come this
far. Gotta
go the
distance,
yeah?"

"Deelloorrrrr..."

ARMOR OF CATASTROPHE, MARK II

The ultimate evil duel avatar, built
using Scarlet Rain's Enhanced
Armament Invincible as a vessel.

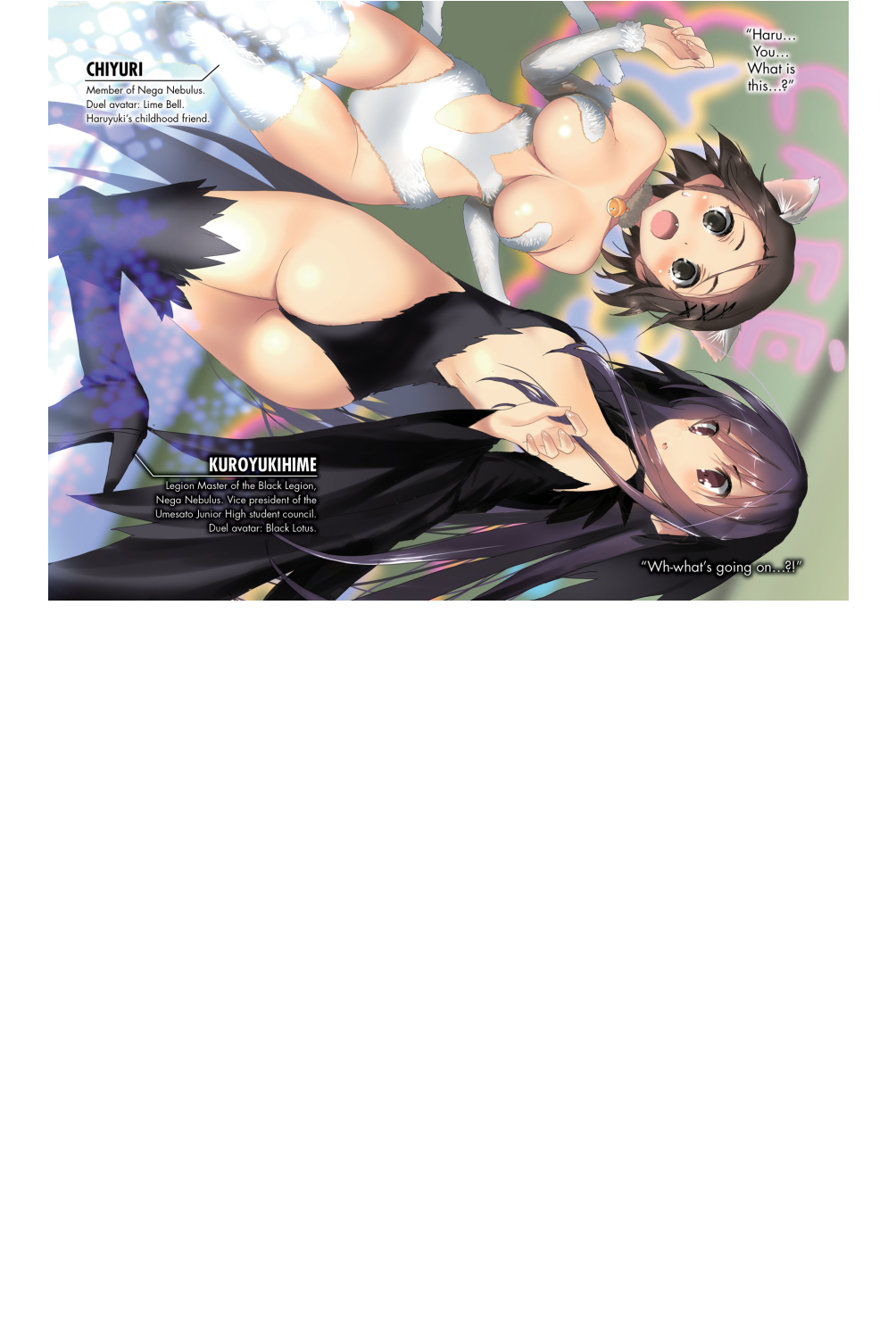
NIKO

Legion Master of the Red Legion,
Prominence. She was kidnapped by
Black Vise but was rescued by
Silver Crow.
Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.

HARUYUKI

Boy in the lowest school
caste. Member of the new
Nega Nebulus, led by Kuroyukihime.
Duel avatar: Silver Crow.

"...We have to fight."



CHIYURI

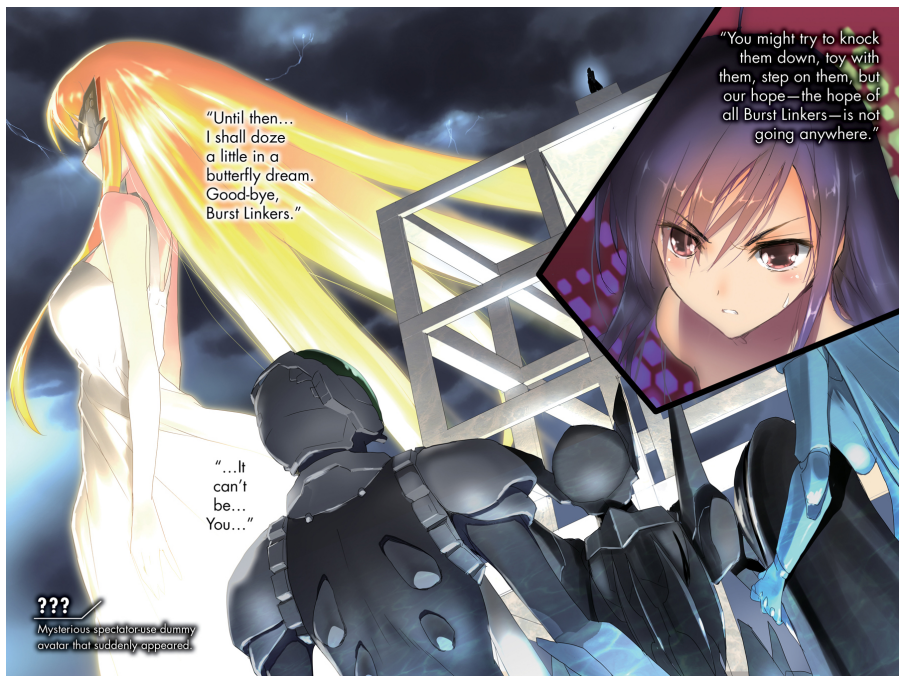
Member of Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Lime Bell.
Haruyuki's childhood friend.

"Haru...
You...
What is
this...?"

KUROYUKIHIME

Legion Master of the Black Legion,
Nega Nebulus. Vice president of the
Umesato Junior High student council.
Duel avatar: Black Lotus.

"Wh-what's going on...?!"



"Until then...
I shall doze
a little in a
butterfly dream.
Good-bye,
Burst Linkers."

"...It
can't
be...
You..."

"You might try to knock
them down, toy with
them, step on them, but
our hope—the hope of
all Burst Linkers—is not
going anywhere."

???

Mysterious spectacular dummy
avatar that suddenly appeared.



ARMOR OF CATASTROPHE, MARK II

The Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, given life by the Acceleration Research Society, is made up of three components.

The first is the mysterious metal color of Wolfram Cerberus, likely created by Argon Array based on the Mental-Scar Shell theory. The second component controls Cerberus—a red light of unknown origin that shot down from the sky into the cockpit to take the wheel of Mark II. And the physical vessel for Mark II is fashioned from the Enhanced Armament Invincible, which was made powerful through the tremendous efforts of the Red King, Scarlet Rain.

This is essentially the same construction as the first Armor of Catastrophe. The original Chrome Disaster was composed of the Beast, an artificial intelligence born from the negative incarnate energy that built up in the successive wearers who first cultivated the Armor and

then by the Armor itself, and the platinum armor, Destiny—the sixth star (theta) of the Seven Arcs, the Enhanced Armament that became the final vessel.

But unlike Mark I, Mark II does not have the techniques of previous wearers, such as the Wire Hook shot from both hands or Level Drain, which makes the health gauge of a devoured avatar its own. At over six meters tall, Mark II rivals a Beast-class Enemy in size, but its only visible weapons are the large laser guns that are equipped on both arms.

It is not clear whether Wolfram Cerberus maintained consciousness after he was incorporated into Mark II's torso, but he seems to have been lost along with the reproduced personality of Cerberus III, aka Dusk Taker, Seiji Nomi. The energy of the red light emitted from the ISS kit main body is believed to rule Mark II's consciousness.

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SNOW WHITE'S SLUMBER

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee




NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 16
REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen
Cover art by HIMA

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

■ **Normal Duel Field** = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.

■ **Unlimited Neutral Field** = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.

■ **Movement Control System** = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.

■ **Image Control System** = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.

■ **Incarnate System** = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.

■ **Acceleration Research Society** = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.

■ **Armor of Catastrophe** = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.

■ **Star Caster** = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.

■ **ISS kit** = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.

■ **Seven Arcs** = The seven strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World. They are the greatsword *Impulse*, the staff *Tempest*, the large shield *Strife*, the Luminary (form unknown), the straight sword *Infinity*, the full-body armor *Destiny*, and the *Fluctuating Light* (form unknown).

■ **Mental-Scar Shell** = The emotional scars that are the foundation of a duel avatar (mental scars created from trauma in early childhood)—this is the shell enveloping them. Children with exceptionally hard and thick “shells” are said to produce metal-color duel avatars.

■ **Artificial metal color** = Refers to a metal-color avatar that is not generated naturally from the subject's mental scars, but rather produced artificially by a third party through the thickening of the Mental-Scar Shell.

■ **Unlimited EK** = Abbreviation for Unlimited Enemy Kill. The subject avatar is killed by a powerful Enemy in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and each time they regenerate (after a fixed period of time), they are killed again by that Enemy, falling into an infinite hell.

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A single, straight line tore through the eternal evening sky. The inky beam shot forth from the upper floors of Tokyo Midtown Tower parallel with the ground, passed overhead full strength, and disappeared into the distant northeastern sky.

What would happen if that beam reached the end of the Accelerated World? Would it disappear without a sound? Cause an enormous explosion? Tear a hole in the very fabric of the world?

As she considered this question, the Burst Linker Magenta Scissor—aka Rui Odagiri—returned her gaze to the source of the beam.

She was sitting in the plaza in the middle of Akasaka Sakas, a large-scale commercial facility in Minato Ward Area No. 1. At Midtown Tower, some eight hundred meters to the southwest, the Black Legion was fighting the ISS kit main body. She couldn't actually see the scene of the battle, but she felt the waves of rage from the main kit that came through the terminal, parasitizing her chest armor.

...No. This rage and hatred the main kit generated had been produced bit by bit in the hearts of kit users like Rui. So some percentage of this black undulation could be said to have originally been Rui's own.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle once explained the difference between hatred and anger, saying that anger is born out of poor treatment of oneself or something that includes oneself. Anger is accompanied by pain and will heal someday if given time. Hatred, however, is born from some cause not directly connected with oneself. Thus, hatred is not accompanied by pain, and therefore, will not be healed by time.

Rui was angry with the Burst Linkers who persecuted the weak with their power, and she hated the system of the Accelerated World that allowed this.

A duel avatar was supposedly born with the player's mental trauma as the mold, which was why there was an infinite variety of forms and abilities. But everyone was supposed to have the same potential. This, however, had turned out to be rubbish. Every single Burst Linker knew there was an absolute unfairness in a duel avatar's

strength or appearance. The majority just pretended they couldn't see it.

For Rui, the members of the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus—the Black King and the Four Elements that were the Legion's executive power in particular—were symbols of the unfairness of the Accelerated World. Their dashing, beautiful, pure appearances. Fighting abilities such that their avatars were crowned with nicknames. They rose up in revolt against the six major Legions, took on the challenge of the impregnable Castle, and although the Legion was destroyed once, they rose up again—even these legends could be read as signs that they were “chosen ones.”

Rui had never fought the Black King nor the Four Elements. So then, according to Aristotle, what she felt toward them was not anger, but rather hatred. A feeling akin to a curse that no amount of time could ever resolve.

But today, Rui had finally tangled with this Legion. With thirteen like-minded ISS kit users, she had waited for them in the Unlimited Neutral Field and dared to fight them, mustering up every bit of strength she had.

And she'd lost. To be honest, it hadn't even been close.

The ISS kit gave its users the close-range technique Dark Blow and the long-distance technique Dark Shot. Given that both were almighty void-element Incarnate techniques, they were impossible to defend against with normal means. Once you mastered these two powers, inequality was erased in the realm of battle power. Powerless duel avatars, seemingly born to be prey for the strong, were now able to fight on a level equal to or greater than that of the members of the Legions of the Seven Kings of Pure Color. That was how it was supposed to be.

But the power of the Black King and the Four Elements far surpassed Rui's expectations. The Dark Blow was evaded, and the Dark Shot was deflected; she'd been unable to land even a single real blow.

It hadn't been just the executives, either. The three younger members of Nega Nebulus—Silver Crow, Lime Bell, and Cyan Pile—hadn't so much as flinched at taking on the kit users, who beat them in number if nothing else and had fought ferociously, even as they grew more and more battered. Cyan Pile and his Incarnate sword, presumably kneaded into existence by the avatar himself now that he had escaped from the kit's control, had even managed to cut down Rui's Remote Cut, an ability she had absolute confidence in against a close-range avatar.

And further shocking to her was the fact that Silver Crow had tried to use his own body as a shield to defend against the laser attack

of the massive Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron when it had suddenly charged onto the battlefield. He hadn't just provided cover for the Black Legion but also for Rui's group.

Before she knew it, Rui was stepping into the sea of flames produced by the aftermath of the laser to hold Crow up. The order to destroy the small duel avatar came at her relentlessly from the ISS kit parasitizing her chest, threatening to rip her in two, but even so, Rui had kept her grip on Crow's shoulders. In that instant, she understood she had lost.

...And yet. Perhaps she'd started to sense it would come to this a few days earlier. Ever since she had fought Silver Crow and lost when he tried to defend the territory-less ephemeral Legion, Petit Paquet, in Setagaya Area.

The jet-black beam that had cut across the sky above her head a few seconds before was the original Dark Shot, fired by the ISS kit main body tucked away at the top of Midtown Tower. Its power was tens of times greater than the terminal's. Any duel avatar it hit would be instantly destroyed; it might have been the most powerful attack in the Accelerated World.

But the Black King and the others wouldn't lose. Through the terminal biting into her chest, Rui felt not only the main kit's rage and hatred, but also a deep fear. She had thought the kit was nothing more than a soulless lump of malice, but it was trembling with fear—with terror.

So was there no meaning to what I did in the end? Did I only invite confusion into the Accelerated World—simply spread hatred and sadness?

Rui looked back again as she asked herself these questions. The thirteen Burst Linkers who she had given—no, parasitized with—the kits were sitting slumped over, as if they had exhausted their strength.

There was a portal in the broadcast building that rose up to the rear of the Sakas plaza, but after walking the kilometer or so from Midtown Tower, she had decided to watch over the Black Legion's battle rather than leave right away. But her comrades' eyes were vacant, dull; they hadn't even reacted to the beam shooting by directly overhead.

As payment for the excessive power it granted, the ISS kit took your heart. Emotions became dulled, and soon, users were spurred on by nothing but a mechanical anger and hatred. The truly frightening part was that the kit's effects extended to the flesh-and-blood body. Symptoms weren't quite as bad as when the user was accelerated, but they were still there—users became quick to anger and prone to depression.

Rui had always been relatively unemotional, and she appeared to have a resistance to the interference, but her comrades had to have

changed so much personality-wise that they wouldn't have been able to hide it from those around them. Perhaps some had even lost friends because of it. The majority had accepted the kit out of their own desire, but for the others, Rui had cut their avatar armor open with her scissors and forcefully parasitized them. She'd convinced herself that this was for their own benefit. That a little interference from the kit was not that big a deal if the alternative was the strong taking their points and banishing them from the Accelerated World as simple prey.

But in the battle that day, Rui had been made to see the absolute limit of the ISS kits—of the power she had been “given.” Dark Blow and Dark Shot were powerful techniques. But they didn't go so far as to make the hearts of those who used them strong. In fact, what power their hearts possessed before they accepted the kits had probably been whittled away.

So Rui knew that she and her group could never defeat Nega Nebulus.

It wasn't that the Black King and the Four Elements had been strong right from the get-go. They had learned from defeat and expended an enormous amount of effort, seeking out and refining the power within themselves. Of course, that inequality known as randomness no doubt loved them, as well. But that was a trivial element now that they had become high rankers. Put another way, every Burst Linker was given the chance to become as strong as they wished. Just like Silver Crow, who was currently on that path of self-improvement.

Supposedly the only perfect flying type in the Accelerated World, she had thought that fate—that the BB system—loved him more than anyone. But that probably wasn't true. Crow was an irregular duel avatar; he couldn't do anything other than fly. He had to have encountered all kinds of setbacks before he came up with attack strategies that used his flight power. And yet, he hadn't lost heart. He believed in the avatar his own heart had produced, had single-mindedly refined his lone power, and had gained the strength to squarely face even a Legend-class Enemy.

Cyan Pile was the same. A born contradiction—a close-range type with a midrange piercing weapon—he had slammed into any number of walls and overcome them instead of giving up, and now, he was finally able to draw his sword proudly from the depths of his own heart. Rui's scissors had cut into his sword over a hundred times, but she hadn't been able to shatter it.

Their strength was proof that the Black King and her executives were giving them proper guidance. It also proved the strength of the Black King and her executives themselves. They were fundamentally

different from Rui and the way she tried to gain comrades and realize her hopes with the borrowed power of the ISS kit. If the kit main body was destroyed, and all the users' terminals also disappeared, would everything Rui had done from the time she became a Burst Linker—the things she had seen and thought—lose all meaning? Would the fact that she had longed for a transient equality in the Accelerated World become nothing more than a foolish delusion?

...No. She was the one who got to decide that. And even in the midst of defeat, loss, and error, she could find something that had value. That shiny crow would almost certainly tell her that.

“...Avo,” Rui called in a quiet voice.

The small sphere lying immediately beside her—Avocado Avoider's true form—responded with a faint “Krrrr.” This curiously shaped avatar retained more of his self than any of her other comrades, likely for reasons other than Rui's.

She picked him up with both hands and set him on her knees. “Let's go see them again someday. To find out the meaning of what we've done—of what we tried to do.”

And then, Rui waited silently for the moment when the ISS kit main body was destroyed.

“What...on earth...?”

Kuroyukihime’s voice was hoarse as she struggled to push herself up on exhausted arms.

On the southern edge of the sprawling forty-fifth story of Tokyo Midtown Tower, the marble floor was melting into a bright-red pool of magma ten meters across. Half sunken into that pool, with its jetting flames and powerful heat, was an ink-black ball. Cracked and scorched by the magma, this object was the root of the evil behind the large-scale chaos in the Accelerated World—the ISS kit main body.

The eyeball-shaped thing had repeatedly fired terrifyingly powerful Dark Blows and Dark Shots and pushed Kuroyukihime and her companions to the edge of annihilation. But the magma produced by Utai Shinomiya/Ardor Maiden’s destructive Incarnate had gutted the mysterious monolith and nearly melted it into nothingness. Its lids were more than half-closed, and the pupil had lost its light; the fleshy armor that had protected the eyeball was also burned away. If it had had a visible health gauge, there would have only been a few pixels left in it.

But Kuroyukihime and the similarly prone Fuko Kurasaki/Sky Raker and Akira Himi/Aqua Current had taken their eyes off this melting body. Instead, they stared at the utterly unremarkable white wall off to the right. In particular, at a single spot on that wall, blackened as though with soot.

Mere seconds before, a narrow shaft of light had shot off from the kit body, pierced the wall—or more precisely, slipped through it—and disappeared off to the south. It hadn’t been an attack; rather, it appeared to have been a beam for the simple purpose of transmitting information. Whatever it was, the instant Kuroyukihime saw that red line, her entire body had grown colder than ice, numb to all sensation.

It had been seven years since she had come into this world as Black Lotus. During that time, she had repeatedly been faced with phenomena that far surpassed her comprehension and beings so fearful that they caused her to freeze in terror. But this transmission shooting from the ISS kit main body—not even three seconds long—

made Kuroyukihime shiver with a fear greater than anything else she had ever encountered.

Malice. That beam transmitted to an unknown endpoint the vast malice accumulated within the ISS kit main body. The pure negative Incarnate energy, refined to hurt, torment, and destroy all Burst Linkers.

The Incarnate System was the strongest force in the fighting game Brain Burst. An imagination honed to the limit overwrote every kind of phenomenon and brought about a myriad of miracles. But given that it was still a system, the logic had its restrictions.

One: A player could not acquire Incarnate techniques in opposition to their avatar's affinity.

Two: The more powerful the technique, the fiercer the exhaustion it brought about.

Three: Misuse would bathe the player's heart in darkness, causing a loss of self...

In other words, there was a limit to the amount of Incarnate energy a single Burst Linker could produce. Even if you sought a power great enough to destroy the entire Accelerated World, the capacity of an individual mind wouldn't be able to withstand that level of energy.

As far as Kuroyukihime knew, the most powerful destructive Incarnate user was Transient Eternity (aka the White King, White Cosmos), but even she would have to carry out dozens of attacks over the span of a half minute or so in order to destroy even a third of a duel stage—a power that barely compared to Archangel Metatron's laser attack, which had decimated that same area with a single shot. Basically, that was the limit of an individual's Incarnate technique.

The Acceleration Research Society had smashed that limit with a new system, the ISS kits. By giving dozens of Burst Linkers the same Incarnate techniques, collecting and fusing in the kit main body the rage and hatred each of them held in their hearts, the Society had produced a destructive Incarnate energy on a scale previously unseen in the Accelerated World. The fact that the battle with the main kit had ground down Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Akira to the point of being essentially helpless now was proof of how fearsome this power truly was. It would have been utterly impossible for them to mitigate that Dark Shot again. Fortunately, they had just barely managed to protect Utai to the rear so her Dance of Flames could destroy the kit main body.

But the Society's gambit hadn't ended there. A beam of red light had come from the main kit as it was on the verge of death: all the destructive Incarnate saved up in its body. The ISS kits themselves had been nothing more than a means to an end. The vast refined and pure

dark energy in the eye had been sent off somewhere in the Accelerated World. Somewhere, something was about to happen. Something worse—something even more frightening.

“...Haruyuki...” Unconsciously, Kuroyukihime gave voice to the name of her only child.

Haruyuki Arita/Silver Crow had flown off from Midtown Tower in pursuit of the Red King after she was kidnapped by the self-proclaimed vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, Black Vise. She was confident that Crow of all people would bring Niko back to them safely, but Black Vise was an enemy whose depths they still hadn’t plumbed. And it concerned her that the beam of light shot out toward the south side of the Minato Ward Area—the same direction in which Vise had fled.

Cyan Pile and Lime Bell had both gone after Silver Crow, while Blood Leopard had chased after Argon Array, and she hoped the four would be able to meet up, but—

Suddenly, Kuroyukihime heard a small *thud* behind her. Quickly looking back, she saw a small figure on her knees on the chalky floor. The Shrine Maiden of the Conflagration, Ardor Maiden.

“Uiui!” Fuko called weakly from the floor alongside Kuroyukihime. The sky-colored avatar tried desperately to stand, but having taken a direct Dark Shot hit, her legs were missing from the knee down, and her beloved wheelchair was lying on its side far away. The tips of Kuroyukihime’s hands and feet were similarly shattered, and she too had trouble getting to her feet.

“I—,” Akira said, the least damaged of the three. As she staggered into an upright position, the flowing water armor covering her body collected at her feet, and she slid to the rear of the floor. She picked up the utterly depleted shrine maiden avatar and made a side trip to grab the wheelchair before returning to them at a walk.

Having finally succeeded in standing, Kuroyukihime helped Fuko up with the battered remains of her right hand and sat her in the wheelchair.

“Thanks, Lotus, Curren.” Fuko took Utai from Akira and held her tightly on her lap. The additional Noh mask armor covering the shrine maiden’s face had been released, but there was no light in her round eye lenses. A pseudo Zero Fill—the impact of activating such a large technique, a large-scale, fourth-quadrant destructive Incarnate technique. If it had been an actual Zero Fill, she would have recovered at some point, but given the situation, they faced the possibility now of a negative-will overflow.

Fuko gently stroked Utai’s face. “You worked so hard, hmm, Uiui? You just rest now...It’s okay. We’ll be right here with you until you open your eyes, all right?”

Perhaps Utai heard this; to Kuroyukihime, it seemed that the shrine maiden's white face mask softened slightly. Kuroyukihime and Akira exchanged a faint smile before turning their eyes to the southern end of the floor.

Utai's Incarnate attack had ended, but the magma maintained its intense heat, shining a dull red. The ISS kit main body buried in the center of it—or rather, the main body of the main body with all its fleshy armor burned away—had lost its black-pearl luster and was now a hunk of half-burned charcoal. In fact, it had sent all its essential negative Incarnate energy off somewhere, so the black sphere was nothing more than an empty shell. What concerned her now were the words of the re-creation of Red Rider, which had been forced to parasitize the main body.

It wasn't an Enemy or an Enhanced Armament. It was probably a duel avatar. If this massive obsidian eyeball known only as the ISS kit main body was in truth a duel avatar, then it—no, he or she—had a real name. And the Burst Linker with this enormous avatar had to exist somewhere in the real world.

"...Isn't there a way to confirm the avatar name in the Unlimited Neutral Field?" Kuroyukihime murmured.

"No." Akira next to her shook her head slightly. "Don't think so...I still can't believe it, either. That *that's* a duel avatar like us."

"Mm. But there is one way to check that, at least," Kuroyukihime declared, and Akira and Fuko both nodded.

If the ISS kit main body, which looked to be on the verge of death, was not an Enemy or an object but rather a duel avatar, then a death marker would appear immediately after it was eliminated. And the value of the Burst Points added to their totals would be another way to make this clear. If, hypothetically, the marker did appear, and they confirmed that the kit main body was a duel avatar, then the rules of the Unlimited Neutral Field would be applied. The kit would regenerate sixty minutes later, but its essential Incarnate energy had been sent off somewhere, so all that would return to the spot was a powerless shell.

"If it is, then Maiden should be the one to strike the final blow and get the points after pushing it to this place, but..." She turned her eyes to Utai in Fuko's arms, but the shrine maiden still showed no signs of regaining consciousness.

Fuko lifted her face and responded with a faint smile. "You finish it, Lotus. I'm sure Maiden would say that herself."

"I agree," Akira assented.

Kuroyukihime was forced to nod her own agreement. Strength had finally returned to her limbs, and they didn't have the luxury of mulling this over any further. They hadn't charged into Midtown

Tower to destroy the ISS kit main body, but rather to return to the real world through the portal inside the main body and pull the direct cable out of Niko's Neurolinker. Kuroyukihime moved to take a step forward with a shattered sword leg.

And then several things happened in succession.

First, an extremely intense pressure assaulted them from the south—a half-physical shock wave. Reflexively, she looked to the ISS kit main body, but that was not the source. It was coming from the direction of the red beam on the other side of the walls enclosing the floor.

“Nngh?!” She was bracing herself before she realized it, wondering if a new enemy had appeared. The source of the pressure was not Midtown Tower where she and her comrades were; the explosive Incarnate energy released by someone somewhere off in the distance had come to them like an air quake. But who on earth could generate that kind of force, enough to rival a volcanic eruption?

Kuroyukihime and her friends were stunned, albeit only for a moment, and simply stared blankly at the southern wall. So they were just a touch late to notice it.

They had thought the ISS kit main body was rendered immobile, given that it was on the verge of death, but this half-dead creature suddenly opened its lids. The exposed blood-red eyeball split in the middle, and a viscous black liquid splattered out, throwing a small something toward Kuroyukihime at incredible speed. A small sphere with tiny tentacles protruding like iron probes.

An ISS kit terminal.

“Sacchi!!” Fuko shrieked hoarsely.

Akira brandished her right arm, while Kuroyukihime also reflexively drew the sword of her left hand. But with fifteen centimeters of its length broken off, she was only able to cut away one of the kit's tentacles.

In the next instant, jet-black needles plunged one after another into Black Lotus's cracked chest armor.

“The Armor of Catastrophe...Mark II...” Haruyuki shook his head back and forth a number of times, as if trying to erase the words that spilled from his own lips.

The many plots of the Acceleration Research Society—the spread of the ISS kit infection, the artificial metal color plan, the abduction of the Red King, Scarlet Rain—the end point of each was the creation of the Armor. Aqua Current, aka Akira Mimi, had guessed as much a few days earlier.

But for Haruyuki, it was just too unreal. The first Armor, Chrome Disaster, had been a cursed Enhanced Armament, born at the dawn of the Accelerated World, accumulating power as it was passed down through six Burst Linkers—that last of which had been Haruyuki himself. Going by just the myriad legends that had sprung up, it might have been able to stand shoulder to shoulder with even the super-class Enemies of the Castle, the Four Gods.

Haruyuki believed no one could produce a thing like that in the span of mere weeks, not even the Acceleration Research Society. But maybe he had only *wanted* it to be impossible. Not just because he was afraid of a new threat to the Accelerated World but also as a matter of misplaced pride as the former sixth Disaster. However, he could no longer deny that the steel giant towering over him only a dozen or so meters away, emitting its peculiar shriek at the overcast sky, strongly resembled Chrome Disaster—the form-fusing machine and living creature with a sinister aura enveloping its entire body.



Standing to either side of him, Takumu, Chiyuri, Pard, and Niko appeared to be speechless, overwhelmed by its enormity. They should have been making the decision to fight or flee, but they simply gaped, unable to move a muscle.

Abruptly, the giant stopped its ferocious roaring and slowly lowered the hands thrust up into the air.

“*Deellooorrrrr...*” Groaning like a combustion engine from the previous century, the monster turned to reveal the flowing lines of its upper torso where a massive single eyeball emitted a brilliant, blood-red light. A cold, bottomless hunger, reminiscent of the shining of the ISS kit eye.

“...Wh-what should we do...?” Chiyuri muttered from Haruyuki’s immediate left.

Her voice was shaking, but her words broke through his paralysis, and Haruyuki took a deep breath. The cool air of the Twilight stage filled his virtual lungs, and he regained a tiny bit of his power to think. “We have to fight,” he croaked.

Chiyuri’s slender avatar stiffened, but no word of objection came from her or from his other comrades. They all understood why he had made that decision.

The original Armor of Catastrophe, Chrome Disaster, had been composed of three elements: the successive wearers of the Armor who had gained power at the same time as they nurtured the item; the Beast, a pseudo intelligence produced from the darkness of the negative Incarnate that accumulated in the Armor; and the Enhanced Armament that became the vessel—the silver armor Destiny, the sixth star, the theta of the Seven Arcs.

The new Mark II generated by the Acceleration Research Society had a similar three-component structure. First, the wearer: the mysterious metal-color Wolfram Cerberus, produced by Argon Array based on the Mental-Scar Shell Theory. Controlling Cerberus was the red light of unknown origin that had shot down from the sky into the cockpit and taken over Mark II. And the vessel for the body of Mark II was the Enhanced Armament, Invincible, which the Red King, Scarlet Rain, had cultivated over years and with enormous effort.

If they were to make absolutely sure, they should retreat from that place, rejoin Kuroyukihime and the others at Midtown Tower, and take on the challenge with their full forces. Unfortunately, however, that wasn’t an option. If they let this moment slip by, there was a very good chance that Niko’s Enhanced Armament, which was basically a part of Niko herself, would be lost forever. They had to get Invincible back. After all, Niko was only helping them in their mission that day as a friend, for the sake of Ash Roller/Rin Kusakabe, who she’d only

just met, and Aqua Current/Akira Himi, one of Nega Nebulus's Four Elements.

Haruyuki glanced to his right. His eyes met Niko's. Before the Red King could say anything, he declared again, "Right now, we still have a chance to take Invincible back. We're absolutely going to get it back. We'll fight him, and we'll win!"

The faint air of a wry grin rose up around the Red King as well as Pard, who was across from her. She shrugged her small shoulders. "Well, we've come this far. Gotta go the distance, yeah? So listen. For the icing on the cake, we're gonna send that giant thing flying and set off some huge fireworks."

"K." And that voice was, of course, Pard's.

"Got it, Haru," Takumu said from Haruyuki's left, as though he'd made up his mind. "If it really is like the Armor of Catastrophe, then the more time passes, the stronger it'll get. If we're going to fight, it has to be now."

"Alill right!" Chiyuri agreed. "I'm gonna knock it on its butt with one—"

"No, Chii, your job's too important," Takumu interrupted. "You need to step back to the rear."

"A-again?! That's all I *ever* do!!"

Haruyuki's mouth relaxed the tiniest bit beneath his mirrored goggles as the banter between his childhood friends went back and forth.

This was different from the time he'd tried to fight the Armor's control all by himself, in his own interior world, during his stint as the sixth Chrome Disaster. Now, unlike then, he was surrounded by comrades he could count on. And although they were currently over three kilometers away, Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, and Akira were also with them in spirit. He was sure of it. Haruyuki clenched his hands into tight fists as if feeling their fighting spirit.

So far, Mark II had whirled its eyes around very much like a robot with the power turned on for the first time, but now it froze in place. The massive body shifted course another thirty degrees to face Haruyuki and his friends. Venting black steam from the gill-like slits all over the armor, it thundered in a low groan, "*Deel...ru-ru-ru-ru...*"

From the inorganic movement and aura, Wolfram Cerberus—supposedly incorporated into the torso—was apparently still unconscious. A forced personality switch had already wrested control of the avatar from the Cerberus I that Haruyuki knew and given it to Cerberus III a few minutes before the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, had awakened. Although the duplicated personality of III—aka Dusk Taker/Seiji Nomi—had managed to steal four of the five components

that made up Niko's Invincible with his special attack, Demonic Commandeer, immediately after that, he had been hit by the beam of red light that shot down from the northern sky and let out a strange scream before suddenly falling silent...or being extinguished.

If Cerberus I was also still unconscious, then that meant the armor, Mark II, was at the moment being moved by the energy infused by the red light itself. Even the Beast that lived in Chrome Disaster hadn't been able to control the avatar on its own, so the energy that poured into Mark II was something that defied conjecture in terms of both total amount and base nature. But no matter how great the power it contained, this did not necessarily translate into strength. Now, when it was still newly born and awkward in its movements, they had a chance of victory.

"He's got Invincible as the base, so he should be a long-distance type, too," Haruyuki said quickly. "We charge in and stick to the legs—close off its movement. Chiyu, while we're stuck to that guy, you fall back inside the building through the south gate."

The others nodded immediately, with no further complaint from Chiyuri. She was likely also well aware that Lime Bell's ability would play the most critical role in taking Invincible back. Though, no—his assumption here was ridiculous. After all, when Dusk Taker stole his flight ability, the one who had gotten his wings back through a mix of unexpected quick wit and sheer effort was Chiyuri. He lightly touched his fingertips to Lime Bell's arm to communicate his faith in her before calling upon all his mental energy and returning the glare of the iron giant's single eye.

The top of Mark II's head was over six meters from the ground—the size of a Beast-class Enemy—but the only weapons he could see were the large laser guns equipped on either arm. Given that these were the main armaments of Invincible, their power was nothing to laugh at, but there was a charging time of about one second before they fired, so he assumed Mark II wouldn't be able to manage successive shots. The instant the enemy dropped into an attack stance, they would dash in, take the ground directly under the massive body, and crush the legs.

Haruyuki and his comrades also had other advantages. Their current location was the central courtyard of a school-type building, about two kilometers southwest of the old Tokyo Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Surrounded on all four sides by the school, transformed into a white temple, the battleground was limited to thirty meters on the short side and fifty on the long—a cramped space for the massive, long-distance Mark II. If they glued themselves to the enemy and prevented it from firing its main arms while simultaneously continuing to attack, they just might have a chance.

They *would* win. Absolutely. And then they could all laugh and high-five once they got back to the real world.

The enormous single eye of Mark II shone with a reddish-black light in its inner darkness.

“Here we go!” Takumu shouted, and Haruyuki dropped into a low stance, watching for the moment to charge.

The giant slowly raised the arms hanging loosely at its sides. At the same time, the countless slits at the base of the main armament and its five-centimeter barrel opened their mouths, and a sound somewhat like a biological energy charge started to echo through the stage. The evening sky and the school building in the background around Mark II’s arms shimmered like a mirage, perhaps because of the heat venting from the slits.

No...The air itself was becoming unstable. The excessive concentration of high-density energy was distorting the Accelerated World. He’d seen this in the instant before the flame breath of the God Suzaku and the Trisagion of Metatron’s first form. But this was an even larger scale of the warping of time and space.

It couldn’t be...An attack with power that surpassed even those?

Abruptly, the new wings on his back, the Enhanced Armament, Metatron Wings, shivered with a ferocity that resembled an electric shock.

“Gang!” Haruyuki threw out both arms and called out, “Grab on!!”

This was in total contradiction with the strategy he had only just outlined, but his friends did not so much as hesitate. Instantly, Takumu was holding on tightly to his right arm, Pard his left, and they grabbed onto Chiyuri and Niko with their empty hands to yank them up.

The darkness that filled Mark II’s gun barrels shone a deep red.

Deploying the wings on his back in an X formation, Haruyuki kicked off the marble earth with everything he had. The instant his body was off the ground, he released every bit of thrust he was able to generate. The power—enough to make the metal armor of his avatar creak—sent them straight up like a rocket.

Heeeengah! With a screaming roar, two cloudy blood-red great lances shot out of Mark II’s guns.

The two beams of energy plunged into the spot where the five had stood only a moment earlier, and then all color disappeared from the world.

The eternal twilight of the sky, the school that served as the headquarters for the Acceleration Research Society—all of it became a black line drawing on a white background. In the middle of all this, the only color was the half sphere glittering a sinister dark red as it

ballooned ever outward to swallow up even the iron giant that had launched it until it filled the courtyard that was fifty meters to a side. It closed in on the feet of Haruyuki and his friends as he ascended with everything he had.

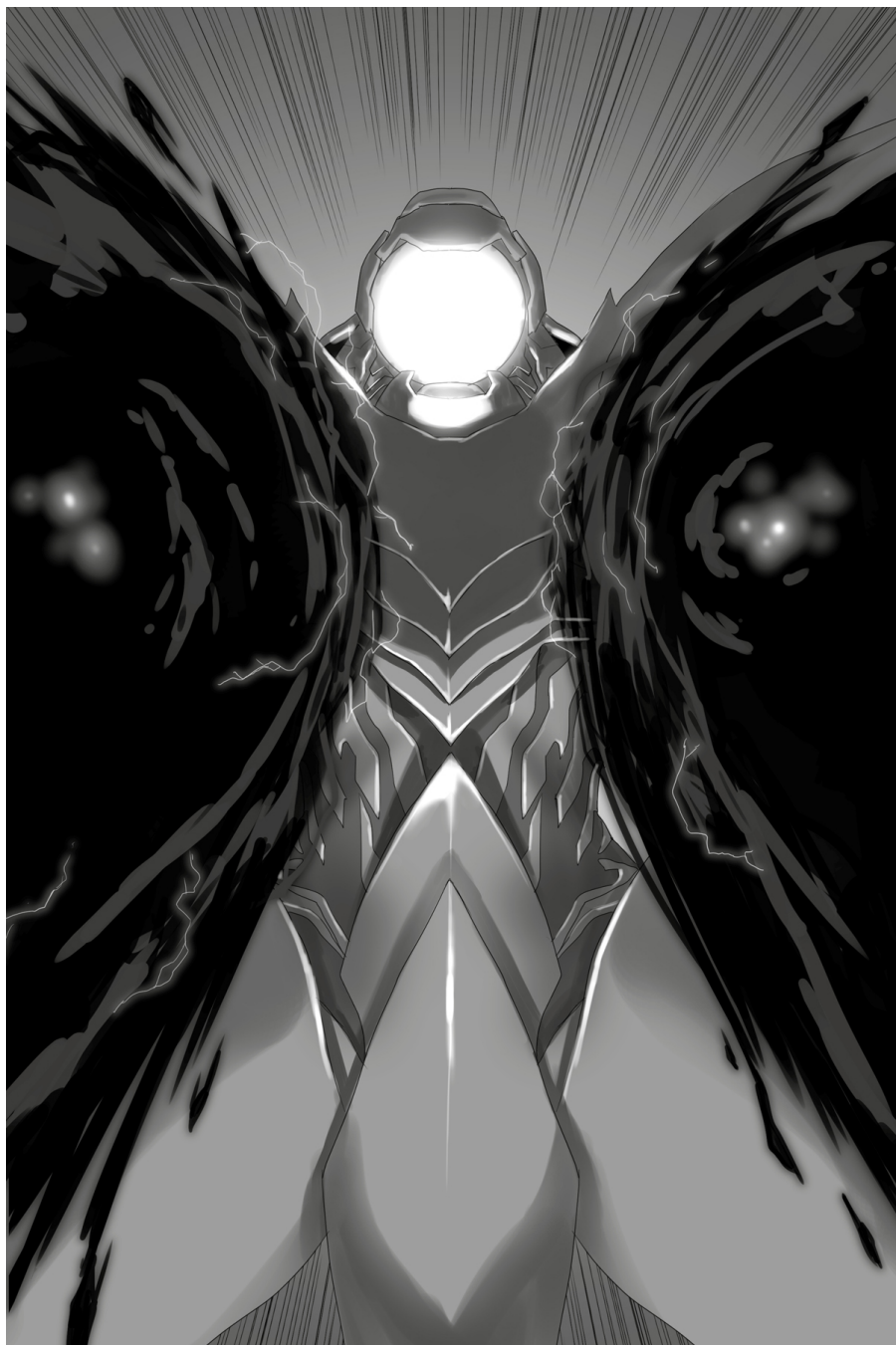
He didn't feel heat or pressure. Instead, Haruyuki was aware of a freezing chill and an intense gravity trying to suck him into the energy ball. Certain it would devour them if he eased up even a little, he continued to fly up toward the rough monotone sketch of the sky.

"Th-the school is—!" Takumu shouted.

Haruyuki couldn't spare a millisecond to look down and check, but he figured the school building surrounding the courtyard had been destroyed.

Normally, that would have been impossible: The school in which Haruyuki and his friends had fought Black Vise and Argon Array was designated as a player home, as hard as that was to believe, which meant it was indestructible. Even to make a tiny hole in the wall separating classroom from courtyard, Haruyuki and Takumu had used successive full-power Incarnate attacks, and they'd still needed Chiyuri's help to finally make it through.

So given that Mark II had just pulverized such a building, it had not fired a normal energy bullet, but rather an Incarnate bullet with nihilistic attributes—in other words, an attack of the same type as the Dark Shot launched by the ISS kit users, but with tens, hundreds of times the power.



“Whoaaaaa!!” Haruyuki squeezed out a cry as he continued his desperate flight.

If it had been Silver Crow’s original wings alone, his special-attack gauge would have been completely exhausted in the blink of an eye with this all-out ascent carrying four people, and they would have already been caught in the explosion. But the power of the new wings he’d been given by the F-type Enemy who said she was the main body of Archangel Metatron—he hadn’t even known there was such a thing until that day—was incredible, and he pushed back against the gravity of the Accelerated World and the attractive force of the negative energy, rising to ever-higher altitudes in the blink of an eye.

Once they had passed a height of fifty meters, one hundred meters, one hundred fifty meters, the chill and roar and pull finally receded and disappeared.

“We should be okay now, Crow,” Niko said.

“Thanksy,” Pard murmured.

He slackened his ascent speed but flew up another twenty meters just in case before shifting to hovering. Timidly, he gazed downward.

“Unh...Aah...” The voice that slipped out was so hoarse, Haruyuki couldn’t believe it was his own.

Color finally returned to the Field, and the southern part of the Minato Ward Area spread out before him. To his left, the east side, stood national highway No. 1, Sakurada Street. To his right, the west side, was the overhead bridge for expressway No. 2. The school, the Acceleration Research Society headquarters, that should have been wedged between the two—no longer existed.

In its place was a large crater nearly 150 meters across. This attack had brought about the same level of destruction as the laser of Metatron’s first form that he had witnessed from Roppongi Hills Tower, but the scale was even larger, with not even a single plume of smoke. The ground had been carved away like a god had dug into it with a giant spoon to shell out a loose arc. The surrounding air swirled up into a roaring whirlwind. There had been at least one tamed knight-type Enemy on the first floor of the school, but that, too, had been instantly evaporated.

Looking down at the terrain around the crater, something jabbed sharply at his memory, but this sensation flew out of his head instantly when he spotted the copper-colored giant rising up in the center of that gray crater, entirely uninjured.

“Getting sucked into an attack like that...and not a scratch on ya,” Niko said, her tone unable to hide the shock.

If they had followed through on their initial strategy of diving in below its legs before the bombardment, the giant wouldn’t have

hesitated to turn its main armaments directly downward on itself, and right about now, Haruyuki and his comrades would have been dust along with the school. If Mark II was still in the ruins when they regenerated sixty minutes later, they might have even taken another hit and been killed instantly, falling into an unlimited EK.

Exactly. This thing was an Enemy now. And forget Beast class, the Mark II surpassed Legend class; in the worst-case scenario, it even rivaled the super-class Enemies beyond that, the Four Gods.

“This is ridiculous...How could it...?” Chiyuri shook her green pointed hat from side to side in Takumu’s arms. This was the girl who had surprised Haruyuki and Takumu by pulling off any number of unexpected turnarounds in too many tight spots, but this time, she appeared to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the destruction.

As was Haruyuki. He’d been able to lift off after the warning from Metatron, who was connected to him through the wings, but he had absolutely no idea what they should do now. The core of his mind was completely numb.

But they couldn’t stay aboveground forever. The Metatron Wings got pretty good mileage, and even hovering with four people hanging off of him, his special-attack gauge was only gradually being consumed, but even so, it would run out sooner or later. They had to reformulate their strategy and find somewhere to land before it did.

The one to break the fearful silence was Pard, glued to Haruyuki’s right half. “We have to find out how long those guns take to charge.”

“Right,” Takumu replied immediately. “As far as I can see, his only weapons are the laser guns. If they take time to recharge, we can cling to him immediately after he fires...”

Niko nodded firmly at this proposal. “And if we make him fire into the sky, we won’t get caught up in the explosion. So then...Crow, next laser, you dodge it somehow in midair.”

“You can do it, Haru!”

When even Chiyuri cheered him on, he couldn’t sit and cower forever. He took a deep breath. “Got it. I’m going to go in slowly, so, everyone, keep a close eye on him.”

“I got this!” Niko shouted. She possessed a Vision Extension ability, and now she opened her eye lenses wide.

Firming up his resolve, Haruyuki started a gentle descent.

“Since the laser fired, it’s now forty-eight seconds, forty-nine, fifty...,” Pard counted calmly, having apparently kept careful track.

Sinking down almost vertically, Haruyuki and his friends had reached an altitude of a hundred meters, when Mark II, encamped in the center of the crater, threw its enormous iron body backward and caught them with the crimson eyeball’s hungry gaze.

“Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine...”

Sixty.

The giant raised both arms and got Haruyuki and his comrades in its sights with the lethal double barrels.

* * *

“Nngh!” Kuroyukihime groaned at the pain, cold and biting.

It felt like even her core was frozen. She had barely stopped the flying ISS kit terminal from touching her avatar with the sword of her right hand, but a dozen tentacles extended from it to pierce the cracks in her armor and press inward. Several had already reached her avatar’s naked body.

If her sword—the reason for her nickname, World End—had been in perfect condition, it would have cut a little thing like the terminal in two instantly, but it was broken and battered after the battle with the main body; she was unable to muster even half of its normal cutting power. And the small eyeball was elastic—rubbery—so that no matter how she pressed her blade into it, it simply warped and twisted; she couldn’t get a handle on it.

“Lotus!” Fuko shouted again, reaching out from her wheelchair to try to pull the kit terminal off.

A little farther away, Akira splashed, as if she was about to run to her Legion master’s side.

But Kuroyukihime called out sharply, “Stop!”

“What?!” The girls froze in place, their faces clouded with apprehension, as though they worried the pollution of the kit had already reached her mind.

“No, I’m fine,” Kuroyukihime reassured them immediately. “But... I can hear something through this thing...No, I can *see* something...” She closed her eye lenses beneath her goggles.

Sound. *Deel, deel, deel*. From far, far away, she heard a heavy, low rumbling that was hard to describe, like an animal breathing or a machine running.

And...sight. The image of a square space enclosed by white walls with plenty of windows, reminiscent of a school somehow, was hazily projected in the back of her mind. For a brief moment, she felt a strange sensation that was almost like nostalgia. She wondered at first if it was the courtyard at Umesato, but there were walls on all sides, so that wasn’t it. It was somewhere she’d never seen—never been...

“.....!!”

Kuroyukihime clenched her teeth hard, eyes still closed, in her immense shock.

She *knew* this place. A courtyard enclosed by school walls on all sides. The altar-like fountain in its center. It had been transformed in

the Twilight stage of the Accelerated World, but there was no mistaking this sense of scale—this atmosphere.

...*This is...* that school. Stunned, when she looked down at her feet from a viewpoint about at the height of a window on the second floor, Kuroyukihime was visited by a fresh shock.

Five small human silhouettes were lined up and looking her way. One was a remarkably small, crimson duel avatar. And on the back of the avatar standing next to her were silver wings that glittered in the evening sun—

“Lotus!!” Fuko’s strained cry rang out once more, and Kuroyukihime’s eyes flew open.

As the phantom scene disappeared, she met the eye of the ISS kit terminal, suddenly only ten centimeters away from her. The sword of her right hand should have been digging into the eye, but all it was doing was yanking back just three of the tentacles. She hurriedly tried to push the bloody orb away, but the tentacles stretched in response, and the inky eye drew steadily closer.

Fuko and Akira both reached out and yanked several tentacles away. But the kit terminal’s survival instinct was too powerful, like it was the last of its kind; it kept pressing in on Kuroyukihime’s face. Eyelids open wide, the crimson pupil emitted a hungry glow just centimeters away.

In the depths of that eye full of empty darkness...Kuroyukihime saw it. Light in the shape of two guns, bodies overlapped to form an X. The crossed guns: the emblem of the Red King and Master Gunsmith, Red Rider.

And in the very instant the eye was about to touch Black Lotus’s goggles, the two guns changed angles with a decisive metallic sound to line up on the horizontal—turning from an X into a minus sign.

Likewise, the crimson iris of the kit terminal suddenly turned gray, all light fading from it. The straining tentacles hung limply and dropped away from Black Lotus’s armor. Fuko and Akira pulled their hands back, and the eye fell to the floor, rolling about a meter before coming to a stop.

“That was close,” Fuko said.

Akira nodded while she said in a slightly reproachful voice, “I was a little worried. What exactly did you see?”

“Oh, mmm. I’m not sure how to explain it,” Kuroyukihime murmured, expelling a long-held breath. Lifting her face, she first crushed the small eye on the floor with her foot before looking over at the ISS kit main body enshrined a little ways off.

The magma of the floor seemed to be finally cooling off, but rather than returning to its original marble form, it was hardening into a gray concrete. The kit main body’s lower half was buried there

—countless fine cracks on its charred surface and tiny pieces peeling off and falling to the ground. The pupil that had launched the kit terminal continued to open wider, and she could see a clear-blue light pulsing regularly inside it. It was the light of the Midtown Tower portal that had been incorporated into the main body.

“The kit terminal that tried to parasitize me seems to have been linked to *something*. But it wasn’t the main body there...It was something far from Midtown Tower...And Haruyuki and the others were—”

“What?!” Fuko cried out in surprise. She gripped the wheels of her chair tightly. “So Corvus and the others are fighting this ‘something’ then? We have to hurry and help them!”

“Before we do, we have to completely destroy the ISS kit main body,” Akira noted. “And someone has to return to the other side through the portal to pull out the Red King’s cable.”

Kuroyukihime thought for a moment before shaking her head. “No. It seems there’s no need for that. I saw Niko standing next to Haruyuki. He got her back from Black Vise.”

“Really?” Fuko smiled, relieved. “Thank goodness. How very like Corvus, hmm?”

Kuroyukihime nodded, but there was still something that concerned her. Silver Crow and his team were facing off against the “something” that was linked to the ISS kit terminal, most likely generated by the massive negative Incarnate energy sent out from the kit main body. So why hadn’t the Red King deployed her Enhanced Armament, Invincible? Well, she’d find out the answer to that when they got there. She had only seen it for a moment, but Kuroyukihime knew the precise coordinates.

“Let’s hurry and regroup with Haruyuki and the others. But first...” Kuroyukihime brandished the sword of her right hand and stared at the ISS kit main body.

“Rider. It was you who activated the crossed guns’ safety and saved me. You promised to deactivate all the kit terminals if we destroyed the main body.”

There was no response. But Kuroyukihime felt like she could see the back of the first Red King riding off somewhere, straddling his beloved horse as he waved two fingers of his right hand in a kind of salute.

“Farewell, BBK...Red Rider.”

She pulled the brandished sword back and shouted, “Death By Piercing!!”

Her special attack was activated without incident even though the tip of her blade was broken, and the resultant light sword easily pierced the ISS kit main body. The inky eyeball shrank inward for just

a moment before exploding into millions of pieces. A dark pillar soared up to the ceiling before gradually growing thinner and disappearing. So far, this looked like the death effect of a duel avatar, but she still couldn't say for sure. Would the death marker appear or not? That would make the truth of the ISS kit main body clear.

But what actually happened was far beyond anything Kuroyukihime and her comrades had expected. The black fragments shooting through the air became red ribbons one after another and dissolved into nothingness. Weaving the ribbons was the thread of fine binary code.

This was a duel avatar's—

“...Final extinction event?!” Fuko squeezed a strained voice out.

“It is,” Akira assented.

No marker appeared, but there was no room for doubt. The ISS kit main body was a duel avatar—no, a Burst Linker, and with Kuroyukihime's final attack, their Burst Points had dropped to zero, so they had vanished from the Accelerated World forever. In other words, while the reason for it was unclear, the main body's points had been on the verge of drying up.

As the last of the red ribbons melted into the air, a crisp blue light spilled out and colored the entire stage—it was the appearance of the portal that had been locked up inside the kit body. The pulsing blue light was almost holy, purifying the miasma that had filled the floor.

With this, not only was the last kit that had tried to parasitize Kuroyukihime deactivated, but now all the ISS kits already equipped by Magenta Scissor, Avocado Avider, and every other user should have been deactivated—and the mental interference cut off as well. Naturally, this also included the kit parasitizing Ash Roller/Rin Kusakabe lying in the nurse's office in the real world.

Who exactly had the kit main body been? Why had they been nearly out of points? Mysteries remained, but Kuroyukihime put those questions aside for the time being and turned around. “Raker, I'm sure you want to go running to your child's side...”

Fuko shook her head, indicating that there was no need for Kuroyukihime to finish. “I understand. There's still something we have left to do, yes? Let's hurry to where the others are and fight this enemy—although I'm not quite sure what it is. And then, we'll all go home together.”

It wasn't Kuroyukihime or Akira who responded to those determined words.

“You're exactly...right. I'm more than able to keep fighting.” The voice was faint, but there was a strong center to it; its owner was Utai, held in Fuko's arms.

Kuroyukihime gasped and turned her gaze in that direction to see

the shrine maiden avatar return her gaze, eye lenses alight once again. “Are you all right, Maiden?”

“Yes. I was simply pulled in slightly because I used the Incarnate technique for so long...But you, Ren, and Fu protected me, Lo.” Smiling, the little girl slowly raised her hands and wrapped her arms around Fuko. Looking like the very picture of a girl adoring her older sister, she pressed her face into the chest of the sky-blue avatar. “Thank you, Fu.”

Like many Burst Linkers, Utai Shinomiya changed what she called her comrades in the real world and the Accelerated World. For instance, Kuroyukihime was Sacchi or Lo, and Haruyuki Arita was Arita or C. But when it came to Fuko, at some point, Utai had started calling both the duel avatar and her real self Fu, for the most part.

Fu was the *Fu* from Fuko, so there was a slight risk of this leading to being cracked in the real. In fact, for a while after she joined the Legion, it had been Raker. Given how reserved and generally reluctant Utai was to reveal the depths of her heart—although on this note, Kuroyukihime herself was hardly one to talk—the fact that she was so stuck on the name Fu, which could almost be said to be a violation of manners as well, was proof that she wanted this connection with Fuko that much, this true bond.

And Fuko herself, rather than squeezing Utai with all her might and squealing “Uiuiiii!” like she usually did, now simply stroked the girl’s back silently. Perhaps the brief contact restored her mental energy; Utai quietly sat up and said thank you once more before dropping down to the floor.

She staggered for the briefest instant but then immediately stood up straight and offered calmly, “Now, let us hurry. C and the others are waiting.”

“Mmm. Let’s go.” Nodding forcefully, Kuroyukihime turned around.

The portal was right there, so if they returned to the real world momentarily and then accelerated again, the damage they’d received would have been completely recovered. But then they would have to start again from the Umesato student council office in distant Sugunami, and they didn’t have the time for that. They had to join up with Silver Crow and the others as soon as possible, muster whatever power was left in them, and fight this giant “something” that had been born in the Accelerated World.

As she advanced in an unstable hovering motion, Kuroyukihime glanced one last time at the area around the shining portal on the southern edge of the floor. There was essentially no trace anymore of the duel avatar that had been called the ISS kit main body, nor any sign of Red Rider, who had been forcibly called back from the distant

past and made to produce the kit terminals. She didn't know if Rider's memories, which she assumed had been copied from the real first Red King and stored somewhere in the Brain Burst central server, had been completely erased in the battle that day. As long as the necromancer who brought Rider back to pseudo life was still alive, there was the possibility of the same thing happening again.

However, she could not allow it a second time. She would confront them and that necromancer hiding somewhere in the Accelerated World, once this current fight was over. All the lingering mysteries of the ISS kit main body would be resolved at that time.

She took her eyes off the portal and advanced another dozen or so meters to stand in the southeast corner of the floor. There was a small, sooty scar in the marble before her eyes. *This* was where the red beam had shot out into the world. She waited for Utai, Akira, and Fuko in her wheelchair to come to a stop behind her before brandishing her swords above her head. The damage to the blades was severe, but they were still sharp enough to cut through the wall of a building in the Twilight stage.

She brought them diagonally downward and then followed this up with a horizontal slice with her right foot to complete the outline of an equilateral triangle in the wall. Finally, she pushed lightly with the tip of her sword, and the block of marble dropped outward, leaving a large hole.

The southern part of the Minato Area they could see from the forty-fifth floor of Midtown Tower was, at first glance, enveloped in a peaceful quiet.

Before them stood the Roppongi Hills Tower on the other side of the overpass for national highway No. 3. On its western side, the dense cluster of the embassies of Azabu. But somewhere in this scene, at that very moment, Silver Crow and the others were facing the final battle.

Kuroyukihime started to turn around to ask Fuko if she could fly them there when, from the distance of Hills Tower, a phenomenon that could be called nothing other than "black light" swelled up soundlessly. The chalky-white town illuminated in the setting sun was swallowed up by a jet-black half sphere tinged with blood-red sparks. An instant later, a thunderous roar reached Midtown Tower and shook the entire enormous building.

A Dark Shot explosion. And on a scale even larger than that launched by the ISS kit main body.

"Haruyuki!!" Kuroyukihime screamed.

Haruyuki frantically tried to pull his focus back from the massive gun barrels aimed at him. He'd falter in his midair evasion if he only looked at them; he needed to look at everything—at the whole of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II's massive bulk, and the unfathomable hunger it radiated. Even if his opponent was a heartless monster, as long as it had a hostile will, Haruyuki would be able to sense any increase in it.

"Deeeel..." The giant let out a low moan, almost as if it was mocking Haruyuki's tension.

A high-density energy began to swirl a reddish-black within the guns. A nihilistic attack, but Haruyuki didn't sense the inorganic nature of the Dark Shot of ISS kit users. It was more alive, full of the desire to destroy, crush, and eliminate everything. Mark II itself was basically a soulless iron robot, while the Dark Shot alone that it launched contained a tangible will. But whose will was it, exactly?

It wasn't that of the incorporated Wolfram Cerberus. Nor was it that of Cerberus II who had parasitized him, or Cerberus III, the already eliminated Dusk Taker. Most likely, it was the will of the red light itself that had shot down from the sky to take over the armor.

When that beam of light had arrived, the Acceleration Research Society's Argon Array had shouted, as though stunned, "It's too soon. Like, this is too much! It can't be...That lot, they went an' did it in?"

He couldn't say for sure what "it" was, but he could hazard a guess. Most likely, the thing hidden away in Midtown Tower...

One part of his mind followed the trail of these thoughts, while the rest of it concentrated. But as if Mark II refused to allow his brain to consider these questions any further, its hostility grew several orders of magnitude larger. The tips of the two guns housed an inky cross of light. Haruyuki had no sooner seen this than he was releasing the energy stored in the wings on his back.

"Whoa...Ohhh!!"

Not right or left, not forward or back, but down. He turned the weight of the four people he was carrying in his arms into the momentum for a sharp dive. Of course, if he kept up like that, they would take a direct hit from a beam of the greatest destructive force in the Accelerated World and disappear without a trace. The instant the great lances shot forth from the barrels in spiraling arms of black and red, however, he flapped his wings with everything he had and slid their falling trajectory inward.

The twin beams passed Haruyuki and his comrades at a mere meter away and fell into the distant evening sky of his inverted field of view. There was no damage, but they felt a wave of energy so strong as to shake even the sky, and he lost his balance.

Rather than go against the vibration, Haruyuki whirled his body

around and put on the brakes for just a moment as he shouted, “Everyone! I’m letting go!”

“Okay!” Niko had no sooner shouted on behalf of the entire crew than he was opening up the arms that were wrapped around Pard and Takumu. Those two avatars released Chiyuri and Niko at the same time, and the five Burst Linkers went into a free fall.

“Aaaaah!” The first to roar out a battle cry was Takumu as he readied the pile driver of his right hand. “Cyan Lightning Spike!!”

His level-four special attack and its immense piercing power: The iron pile transformed into a pale plasma and shot out toward the lens of the single eye, the only unarmored part of Mark II’s massive body.

Next, Niko drew the weapon equipped on her left hip for the first time in this fight, took a wide stance, and readied the somehow adorable gun in both hands.

“Scarlet Exploder!!” She shouted the name of what was probably an Incarnate technique and pulled the trigger. A brilliant bullet of red light whistled through the air.

Pard, now in Beast Mode, tucked her arms and legs under her in midair and shouted the name of a technique Haruyuki didn’t know. “Bloodshed Cannon!!” A semitransparent tube materialized to enclose her, and a terrific explosion boomed at the tail end of it. Instantly, Pard shot straight down like an enormous bullet.

Of course, Haruyuki wasn’t simply sitting there watching everyone attack. The instant he felt the slight shiver of urging vibration from the Metatron Wings on his back, he crossed his clenched fists before him and shouted as loudly as he could, “Ekteniaaaaaa!!”

Maybe the technique name wasn’t necessary, but in response to Haruyuki’s will, the two white wings stretched upward. He raised his crossed arms, and as he brought them down before him, the wings became a lance of pure white and charged toward Mark II’s head.

There wasn’t so much as a second of delay between the four attacks. Takumu’s plasma lance struck the dark-red eye squarely in the center, sending dazzling sparks scattering. Niko’s Incarnate bullet then made a direct hit in the same place, and a single crack raced across the lens. Pard, transformed into a bullet herself, slammed into the single eye of the giant, triggering a massive explosion—well beyond the domain of a body slam—and the crack in the lens fissured into a spiderweb.

Haruyuki’s Ektenia slipped by Pard as she somersaulted in midair and moved away from the line of sight so that both hit the mark simultaneously. He heard a loud sound like the ringing of a church bell, and then countless cracks blanketed the lens, and it clouded over a milky white.

“Ruu...Dee...ruuu...” Mark II groaned in agony as it reeled

backward. But even with the concentrated might of all four of their strongest attacks, the single lens did not reach the breaking point; they had not brought down the giant.

“Nngh!” Haruyuki sucked a sharp breath in through clenched teeth.

His comrades’ attacks were all powerful, but his Ektenia was strong enough to have destroyed in a single blow the crown object that tamed the knight Enemy in the basement of the Acceleration Research Society’s hideout. If the single lens, which he assumed was Mark II’s lone weak point, had this kind of strength, then the armored part of the giant was essentially indestructible. He thought about making one more push, but once they hit on the ground, they wouldn’t be able to get the right angle to hit the eye.

Takumu, Niko, and Pard had already dropped into landing positions, so Haruyuki was the only one still able to do a follow-up attack. But he couldn’t move until his extended wings returned to his back. *Hurry!* he called fervently in his heart.

“Aah...Hngaaaaaah!!”

Suddenly, a ferocious battle cry rang out across the crater. It was Chiyuri, who he’d assumed was taking cover to the rear. Using his right shoulder as a stepping stone, she brandished the large bell of her left hand, Choir Chime, high in the air. Head thrown back as far as it would go, the small avatar used the massive recoil and yanked the bell down in one swoop.



Ringoooooong!! The impact was solemnly sonorous as Bell slammed her weapon into the center of Mark II's lens.

After an instant of silence, the massive eyeball turned into an infinite shower of rubies and scattered through the air.

"Graaaaaoooooh!!" Howling in anguish, the giant staggered backward until it finally collapsed, shaking the earth as it fell.

"Nice, Chiyu!" Haruyuki shouted as he flapped the white wings that had finally returned to his back and grabbed his falling friend's arm. He put on the bare minimum of brakes and came down to stand next to their comrades on the ground.

"Twenty seconds!" Pard cried out sharply. This was, of course, the elapsed time since Mark II had fired its main armaments at Haruyuki and the others in the air. They'd already confirmed that the guns took sixty seconds to recharge, so they had another forty seconds to go.

The problem was whether Mark II's immobile state would continue that long. The single lens had been smashed, and the giant had been seriously damaged, but the almost unearthly aura radiating from it hadn't weakened in the slightest.

If it comes to that, we'll make it stop moving!

Thus resolved, Haruyuki gave instructions in rapid succession. "Niko, Takumu! If that thing looks like it's gonna start moving, stop it with long-distance attacks! Pard, refuel your special-attack gauge!"

In lieu of a reply, the large blue avatar and the small red avatar readied their weapons, while the leopard-faced avatar wordlessly dashed out of the crater, still in Beast Mode. Haruyuki took a deep breath and turned toward the fourth member of his team.

"Chiyu...I'm counting on you!!"

"I got this!!" Chiyuri replied firmly, taking a step forward. She raised her Choir Chime—the assault weapon of a moment ago—into the air again. As she whirled it counterclockwise in a large circle, a clear ringing filled the crater. Once, twice, three times...four times.

"Citron..." A vivid lime-green glittering spilled from the large bell that enveloped her left arm. As she brought it down, her sights set on Mark II still on its back, sluggishly moving its limbs. "...Caaaaaaall!!"

Her voice was full of fight as she shouted the name of the technique, and a torrent of light shot out from the bell opening. The beam flew straight forward, and once it hit Mark II's left leg, it instantly wrapped around his entire body. The chiming of choir bells rained down from the distant twilight sky.

Citron Call Mode II, a special attack of Lime Bell—aka the Watch Witch—had the incredible power of rewinding permanent status changes of the target to four stages back from the present. Which meant she could get back all four of the Enhanced Armaments

Cerberus III had stolen from the Red King. But as was always the case with an ability of this kind of astounding power, there were also serious restrictions. Citron Call used up a fully charged special-attack gauge, and there was a waiting period before the rewind was activated. The beam of light also had no homing function, so it could be easily interrupted if the target moved or hid behind something. When the real Dusk Taker had stolen Haruyuki's flight ability, Chiyuri had gone so far as to pretend to be Nomi's ally without telling Haruyuki or Takumu anything in order to make Taker accept the light of Citron Call.

If the copy of Nomi had still lived in the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, then this time, for sure, he would have tried to evade Citron Call. But the copy had been annihilated, and the red light that shone down from the sky was in control of Mark II now. Something that wasn't even a Burst Linker would have no knowledge of Lime Bell's power. It likely had the instinct to evade an enemy's attack, but the light of Citron Call itself had no power to cause damage, so if Mark II just judged it to be a harmless light and let it wash over its giant form...

Haruyuki's brain was on fast-forward, while time slowed to a glacial pace. Seven seconds left until the status rewind effect activated...Six...

Kashank! Abruptly, he heard an earsplitting metallic sound. Still flat on its back, Mark II lined up its legs and fused them into one. Then its torso lurched upward with the force of a spring released and flopped forward onto its legs—its armor fusing with a squealing creak. Both arms folded up onto the sides of the body and became one with it.

Haruyuki and his comrades were not simply staring slack-jawed while this was happening. The moment the enemy started to move, Takumu and Niko were aiming their respective weapons. Haruyuki also clenched his hands and got into position to activate Ektenia.

Because Mark II's torso was folded forward, the eye on the head appeared in front of Haruyuki and his comrades as a ready target. Lens still smashed, the inside of the sixty-centimeter hole was filled with a dense darkness.

He had absolutely no idea what the giant was attempting by folding itself in half and fusing all its armor together. It wouldn't be able to move if it was a limbless lump. Citron Call wasn't a technique that did damage, so it could shore up its defenses all it wanted, but it was meaningless. But one thing, at least, was clear: It was trying to do *something*. In which case, this was not the time to be twiddling their thumbs.

"I'm firing!"

At Takumu's signal, Haruyuki and his comrades joined together to attack the lone weak point, the large hole on the head. Takumu's Cyan Lightning Pile, Niko's handgun, and Haruyuki's Ektenia were on the verge of piercing the inky darkness when six brown armor plates folded inward like the shutter leaves on an old camera to shut the three attacks out. At the same time, smoke erupted from Mark II's lower half.

Still another four seconds until the activation of Citron Call's effect...Three...

"No way! This guy!" Niko shouted.

"Deeeellluurrrru-ru-ru-ru!!" It roared like an old combustion engine that had no muffler. Transformed into a five-meter-long rod of metal, bent forward with all four limbs fused, Mark II—perhaps due to some propulsive force—charged them.

"Chiyu!" Reflexively, Haruyuki reached and wrapped his arms around Chiyuri, who was still holding her bell before her, light pouring from it, and jumped with all his might. The sharp protrusions stretching out from Mark II's back grazed the tips of his toes, but fortunately, he succeeded in evading the attack. Niko and Takumu also leapt to the sides, unharmed.

But Citron Call, having lost its target with only two seconds left, immediately weakened and disappeared. To activate it again, Chiyuri would have to charge her special-attack gauge to full once more.

But at the moment, there was something more important than that. Hovering in midair, Haruyuki turned and caught the departing lump of metal in his sight.

Human-shaped until mere seconds earlier, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, had transformed into something entirely different. Three rotating bodies covered in tapered metal—wheels—had at some point been generated on each end of the lower half of the armor with its organically curving lines, and these spun against the ground. Black flames jetted from the thrusters to the rear, giving the massive body even more acceleration power.

"What is this form?" Haruyuki groaned.

"That bastard!" Niko responded from the ground, her voice filled with rage. "Transforming into Dreadnought!!"

The dignified human form with two arms and four legs was peculiar to the Invincible, the Red King, Scarlet Rain's Enhanced Armament. As was befitting its nickname, Immobile Fortress, it overwhelmed enemies with its immense firepower, but on the flip side of that coin, it had low mobility. After a great deal of work to compensate for this weak point, Niko had developed a transformation from human form to a tank shape—Dreadnought mode. This had played a big part in their mission, charging into the nest of the God

Suzaku with Haruyuki and the others riding on top or carrying them all from Umesato to the former Tokyo Tower. He hadn't even imagined that Mark II would also be furnished with this transformation ability, though. At five meters in length, it was about half the size of the real Dreadnought, but its speed was that much faster.

"...I only had two seconds left...", Chiyuri muttered regretfully in his arms.

Haruyuki started to nod and then stopped himself and shook his head forcefully. "No, if you kept going like that, he would've run you down. You're our trump card, Chiyu. As long as you survive, we'll make as many chances as you need."

"...Right. I'll go smash some buildings and charge up my special-attack gauge."

"Do it!" This time, he nodded deeply and descended to the ground, where he passed Chiyuri to Takumu. "Taku, guard Chiyuri until she's charged up! There was a building just to the south of the crater that looked breakable! Niko and I will lead that guy away!"

"Roger, Haru! Red King! Don't do anything reckless!"

"We'll be back in a minute!" Chiyuri added.

As the childhood friends raced off, Mark II spun around at the northern edge of the crater, smoke snaking up from all six of its squealing tires. It stopped with Haruyuki and his comrades before it, and the six shutter leaves protecting the eye opened slightly. Even if it was a lump of Enhanced Armament moved by something inhuman, it apparently still needed to see what was outside.

Mark II, Haruyuki, and Niko glared at one another for a bit, separated by less than fifty meters.

"Crow," Niko murmured abruptly, standing to Haruyuki's immediate right. "I'll say this now. Thanks for coming to rescue me."

Haruyuki swallowed before responding in a hushed tone, "Of course. I mean, you came with us to help us, after all."

"But gettin' caught by that pile of panels was entirely on me. And four o' my Enhanced Armaments got taken 'cause I couldn't get out of that restraint under my own power. So all the responsibility for this sitch is on me."

"....."

The small, red-type avatar spoke with resolve, her eye lenses still turned toward Mark II. "So I'll finish this guy off. You take Pile and Bell and head back to Midtown. Don't worry. Once we take care of this lug and get my Enhanced Armament back, Pard and I will—"

Haruyuki grabbed hold of Niko's wrist tightly. He had no intention of letting her say anything more. "We all go back together, Niko. I made a promise."

"I said I'd protect you." He didn't say those words out loud, but he believed she heard them through the armor of their touching avatars.

Niko didn't answer right away. Instead, she raised her hand and gripped Haruyuki's tightly in return. "...nks." She murmured something in a voice so faint that Haruyuki couldn't catch what she said, and then she shouted loudly to make up for it, "Ya never listen, huh? Even though you're just a baby bird! Well, that's it, then. We'll knock this guy flying together!!"

"Roger!!"

As if roused by the pair's combined battle spirit, the armored tank also jetted dark steam from the gill slits covering it. The eye shutter opened even farther, and a red light flickered in the darkness inside. Deep down in that darkness, Wolfram Cerberus was being held prisoner.

After appearing in the middle of a duel with Haruyuki, Cerberus II said he'd been "tuned for a certain purpose." And this purpose was to equip that *thing* Haruyuki had sealed away. This "thing" was obviously the original Armor of Catastrophe, the Enhanced Armament, the Disaster. But the armor had been split into its original components using Ardor Maiden's purification ability and left to rest in a place where no one could touch it for all eternity.

The Acceleration Research Society, most likely having learned this fact through Argon Array when she'd attended the meeting of the Seven Kings, had thus launched their backup plan. Use the ISS kits, the Red King's Enhanced Armament, and Cerberus III aka Dusk Taker's theft ability to produce a new Armor.

The reason the Acceleration Research Society was so utterly fixated on the Armor of Catastrophe was unclear. It might have been simply because they wanted to sow destruction and confusion in the Accelerated World, but it also could have been nothing more than one element in a much larger plan.

But there was no need to wrestle with that now. If they could rewind Mark II with Chiyuri's Citron Call and return Invincible to its original owner, they could thwart the Society's scheme. And they'd be able to free Cerberus from this mission he hadn't wanted, because he would no longer serve any purpose to the Society.

"Just wait, Cerberus. We'll make you a regular Burst Linker soon, just like I am. And then we'll fight again. We'll win and lose and delight and cry. Any number of times," Haruyuki vowed.

Almost as if sneering at this promise, the armored tank moved the main armaments on either side of the vehicle body. The 60-second recharge time had long since passed, so Haruyuki was ready for the fearsome lasers of annihilation to be fired at any second. He just had to dodge the attack one more time and close in on the tank.

The Armor of Catastrophe, Chrome Disaster—he should probably call it Mark I now—had had any number of abilities. On top of the greatsword that was its main weapon, there was the Wire Hook launched from both hands, the fire-breath attack Flame Breath, the short-distance teleportation Flash Blink, and the ability to make the health gauge of a devoured enemy its own, Energy Drain. But these techniques had been left to the armor by the successive wearers. The newly born Mark II should have only had Cerberus's armor strength and Invincible's main armaments. If they stuck close to the vehicle body, they'd muddle through this somehow.

"I'll fly right before it fires," Haruyuki murmured, still holding Niko's hand.

"Counting on ya."

Evading the laser on the ground meant they would get sucked into an explosion of the same scale as the single blow that had created the crater where they currently stood. They would need to make it shoot into the sky and dodge it there like they had with the second shot.

The eye of the tank opened even wider. The instant the overflowing red malice flashed brightly, Haruyuki instinctively kicked off the ground and flew. Yanking Niko up, he engaged his four wings with everything he had. The double barrels turned sharply up to chase them as they rapidly ascended.

Zzshunn! The launch of the reddish-black lances shook the air. Haruyuki dropped to the left and twisted through the sky to avoid them. Powerful though they might be, a straight trajectory long-distance attack with no homing function wouldn't be able to take Haruyuki down as easily as—

"Crow! Still coming!" Niko shouted suddenly, while a second heavy vibration tried to drown her out.

Mark II had fired the two guns separately.

"Nngh!!" Haruyuki yanked himself out of the roll to the left and veered to the right. The pressure threatened to rip his entire body apart, but he gritted his teeth and kept turning. The great nihilistic lances grazed the tip of his lower-left wing, sending black sparks shooting off around them. Although he tried to pull away, the laser itself seemed to have some kind of gravity; he was being yanked toward it whether he liked it or not...

"Rah...Raaargh!!" In response to Haruyuki's battle cry, Metatron's wings flapped powerfully. The momentary thrust severed the laser's pull, and Haruyuki and Niko started a sharp descent, spinning and falling downward to the right.

In the center of his upside-down field of view, he could clearly see the massive bulk of the armored tank. Perhaps intending to avoid a collision with Haruyuki and Niko, the many tires were spinning

frantically backward, while the shutter in the eye started to close.

“Like I’m lettin’ that happen!” Niko thrust her gun forward and fired blindly. Flames of impact bloomed one after another around the shutter, and the speed at which it was closing slowed.

“Laser...” Concentrating on the image of light in his left hand, he shouted at the top of his lungs, “...Lance!!”

He thrust his hand downward, taking advantage of the added speed of their free fall, and a silver light jetted forth to hit Mark II’s eye just as the shutter was on the verge of closing completely.

The blowback to his arm was fierce; sparks flew from his wrist and elbow joints. The 50 percent remaining in his health gauge was cut that much further, but the shutter that protected the enemy’s eye was damaged. It stopped moving, leaving a hole about five centimeters across.

“Niko! There!” Haruyuki said as he spread his four wings and decelerated, but Niko was already stretching out her right hand, the red handgun clenched tightly in her small fingers, and pulling the trigger.

Krk, kew, kew, kew! Six light bullets drove into the darkness of the hole.

The massive armored tank shuddered fiercely, emitting a strange pained noise: “*Deel...looroodeeroo...!!*”

We gotta keep this up! Haruyuki flung himself at the front of the tank, half colliding with it, and grabbed onto the opening of a gill slit with his left hand. He had no sooner checked that Niko was similarly supporting herself than he was opening his hand and brandishing it high above his head.

“Laser...” Pushing his imagination to the limit, he brought a powerful light into his right hand. If he could pierce the eye, even the mighty Mark II should stop moving. The power of the nihilistic laser and the transformation into Dreadnought put the fear of the fight in him, but he would end it all right now. Today, he would forever check the ambitions of the Acceleration Research Society. He started to bring down his light sword—

But he failed to notice one thing. The fact that Mark II had fired the two guns at different times showed its learning ability—the evolution of its fighting style.

The word *sword* was on the verge of leaving his throat in a yell when a black shadow, a fast-moving mist, charged in on him from both sides of the vehicle and seized him. “Wha—?!”

“Crap!!” Niko yelped at the same time.

They were already being peeled away from the front of the tank with an irresistible force, caught up in Mark II’s arms, which had supposedly fused into the sides of the tank. Three massive talons

squeezed his avatar, and the incredible pressure made his armor squeal. His health gauge dropped even further until it was dyed a deep yellow.

“Ni...Niko...!” Fighting back the dizzying pain, Haruyuki desperately reached out with his right hand, now bereft of the Incarnate light.

But he couldn’t reach Niko where she was trapped by the arm growing from the left side of the tank. Before his eyes, the crimson armor—already badly beaten—split and crumbled with tiny fragments gleaming like blood as they fell to the ground. She might have been a level-nine king, but the armor strength of the pure, long-distance-type Scarlet Rain was likely less than that of his metal color. But she did not so much as groan in pain.

“Tch! Messed that up,” she remarked bravely. “Forgot this guy’s arms’ve got hands, unlike my Dreadnought.”

“Hang on. I’ll...get out soon!”

Perhaps it was fortunate that he was being held on the top of the tank. Unlike Niko, who was snugly wrapped up in the massive fist, arms and all, Haruyuki was held only from the waist down, leaving his arms and wings free. Enduring the agony, he brandished his right hand once more and called back the Incarnate light. His Laser Lance had a range of more than ten meters, so it should make it to her.



“Forget about me!” Niko shouted in a sharp voice before he could launch the technique. “Hit the eye!!”

“B-but!”

“I’m not gonna get done in by somethin’ like this! Hurry and shoot, Crow!!” The Red King sounded like her impatience was greater than her pain. She must have felt it, too: that Mark II’s battle sense was improving at a terrifying rate.

“Got it!” With no other choice, Haruyuki shifted his gaze from Niko to the armored tank. Although the shutter was damaged, the diameter of the hole that led to the eye—the monster’s lone weak point—wasn’t even five centimeters. He might not make it through the hole with Metatron Wings’s Ektenia. His only option was his Laser Lance, but would he be able to accurately fire at a pinhole while his lower body was being crushed?

No, it wasn’t a matter of could or could not. He *had* to. He turned the tip of the Incarnate lance lodged in his right hand toward Mark II’s single eye. His silver overlay output was unstable; it trembled and flickered.

More. More light! He focused intently on pulling out every bit of energy left to him.

Mark II didn’t let this mere millisecond of stagnation slip by. It stopped trying to crush Haruyuki and Niko and suddenly threw its arms out. The fists clutching them were thrust out forcefully.

“Nngh!!” Haruyuki cried out at the shock, so great that it threatened to tear his soul right out of his avatar. He lost both vision and hearing, and the dim world became nothing but a high-pitched screeching. In the upper left side of his field of view, his health gauge dropped more than 20 percent all at once, plunging into the dangerous red zone.

“*Deeloooo...*” A low groan came from the tank with arms. Its fists were still spread out to the sides, and there came another collision. *Boom!* The massive roar was like a cannon shot, and his gauge lost another 20 percent, leaving a mere 10 percent. If he took another hit like that, he would die.

The extreme agony went beyond pain—it felt like his body was about to fall apart, but he still managed to squeeze out, “Ni...Niko!”

“I...I’m still here...” The reply, similarly weak, came from a little ways off. Then she said, with just a bit more strength, “Crow. I’m gonna create an opening, just for a second. You gotta use it to escape somehow.”

“Huh? An opening? I mean...how?” His eyes widened in desperation, and as his vision slowly recovered, he caught sight of the small figure of the Red King.

She was held firmly from shoulders to hips by the three massive machinelike talons; there was no way she could fire the gun in her right hand. The damage to the exposed parts of her armor was severe, and a blood-red light effect poured from those areas. Inside the fist, the damage probably reached the avatar's naked body. The small, battered figure began to recede. Mark II was opening its arms for the third time. If they were slammed outward again, both Niko and Haruyuki would die.

Suddenly, from a gap in the claws that held Niko came a crimson glimmering many times more brilliant than the twilight sun pouring down over the stage: It was overlay, proof of the activation of the Incarnate System. But the only Incarnate attacks Niko could use without her Enhanced Armament were Radiant Beat, which launched flame bullets from her fist, and Radiant Burst, which fired a succession of these. If she activated either technique while she was caught in Mark II's fist, the flames would burn up not only her enemy, but also Niko herself.

This was Niko's plan—no, resolve. She was going to sacrifice herself to create an opening for Haruyuki to escape from the restraint.

No. You can't. Absolutely not. I said I'd protect you.

"I...promised!!" Haruyuki spread his wings in a trance. The Mark II's claws ate into his avatar's hips and legs like a vise. No matter how he tried to fly, he wouldn't be able to shake them off. But there was one thing he *could* still do.

His mind, half-muddled from the double impacts, had no way to generate the focus needed to activate his Incarnate technique. But flying—revving up the wings that were his duel avatar's reason for existence—and aiming for the sky...

"Niko! Trust...me!!" he shouted again as if to rip his throat open, pouring all his remaining willpower into the silver-and-white wings.

"*Deeraaar!!*" Unleashing a roar of rage, Mark II moved to slam together once more the fist that held Haruyuki and the hand clutching Niko.

In the next instant, a shooting star shining a deep red pierced the gap between the two. The ball of light smashed into the front of the armored tank and exploded magnificently. Fortunately, Haruyuki and Niko were wrapped up in the fingers, and neither took anything more than a little scraping damage. But Mark II's single eye had been wide open when it took that direct hit. The giant lurched backward, howling in agony.

A long-distance firing attack?! Who on earth—?!

Eyes wide open, Haruyuki spotted a figure in the middle of the dying bonfire: a crimson leopard, throwing her body back as she fell to the ground.

It wasn't a gun attack. It was the special attack Bloodshed Cannon, which turned the very body of Blood Leopard—Bloody Kitty, one of Prominence's Triplex—into a bullet. She had gone beyond the crater to recharge her special-attack gauge and was now taking decisive action to save Niko and Haruyuki with a suicide attack.

After hitting the front of Mark II—equivalent in strength to Wolfram Cerberus's tungsten armor—with a body blow, Leopard slammed into the ground, pieces falling from her own armor.

This sight roused a new flame in Haruyuki's heart. *I can't waste this last chance Pard created for me. I have to fly. If I don't fly now...Then why do I even have wings?*

"Ah...Aaaaaaaaah!!" As Haruyuki howled, ribbons of dazzling silver light unfurled from his back. His own wings sang in loud resonance with Metatron's and shook the Twilight stage.

The enormous fist clutching Haruyuki reached out, showering sparks. The front of the armored tank rose several dozen centimeters into the air, thanks to Pard's attack, and stopped at that angle. Although the tension threatened to rip him to pieces, Haruyuki kept fueling his wings with all his strength. Waterfalls of sparks shot out from the armor joints of his shoulders and chest and stomach. Already down to just 10 percent, his health gauge was carved away bit by bit.

So heavy. He'd known in his mind that the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II's mass far surpassed the range of a Burst Linker, but this was something else. It might have been missing one of the original Invincible's parts, but it still didn't so much as shift, almost as though it were fused to the stage itself.

His special-attack gauge, charged when he took serious damage in the two fist collisions, was dropping with terrifying speed. Once it hit zero, he would lose his last chance. Haruyuki and Niko would be killed instantly, and Pard, collapsed on the ground below, would also be taken out.

He stretched his hands up into the sky. His mind started to burn white. "Light...", he shouted with the last of his fuel, his very existence itself, "...speeeeeeeed!!"

Even the logic of the Incarnate System—concentrating one's imagination to overwrite the phenomenon—was long gone from his head. If he'd been trying to activate an attack, the system would not have responded to his call of the name. But Haruyuki's second-quadrant Incarnate technique, Light Speed, was unstable; its activation strongly depended on his mental state. It was this instability that responded to Haruyuki's will now.

A light dozens of times greater than anything he'd produced thus far jetted from his wings, almost like the explosion of a supernova. As the silver overlay colored the world white, Haruyuki saw the sky come

mere tens of centimeters closer. The maliciously spiked tires of the armored tank pulled away from the ground one after the other. The massive five-meter-long body began to tilt farther and farther upward.

“Unh...Aah...Aaaaaaaah!!” Haruyuki shouted, the last of his willpower on the verge of burning out completely, and called in one corner of his heart, “*Metatron. One more time...One last time, lend me your strength.*”

He heard no response. But he didn’t have to see it to feel the snowy white wings on the upper part of his back manifesting another wing. With his original silver wings, three pairs of wings now stretched out from his back, generating a layered harmony like the song of an angel.

In the center of the explosion of light powerful enough to wipe out even two gauges, Haruyuki flew. The sky was close. The earth grew distant. But the massive talons continued to hold fast onto his avatar.

Haruyuki ascended—the entire massive bulk of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, dangling below him. *Higher...Higher...!!*

Mark II couldn’t fly. Which meant if he could bring it up to a super-high altitude, he could do some severe damage to the armor, even if it meant he died while doing so. He wouldn’t be able to finish the job of protecting Niko, but Pard, on the ground, would definitely rescue her for him.

So higher he rose. Into the sky.

He was about to flap his six wings one final time with everything he had when the restraint that had held him like a vise abruptly disappeared. Mark II had let go on its own. In reaction, Haruyuki started to ascend rapidly, but he opened his wings wide and barely managed to brake and reorient himself downward.

His altitude was maybe five hundred meters. Against the backdrop of the dusky Twilight stage, the enormous armored tank immediately lost momentum and started to fall. It had apparently released Niko at the same time as Haruyuki; he spotted the crimson avatar in the air a little ways off.

Although he was on the verge of passing out from the enormous mental strain of his flight, Haruyuki desperately held fast his consciousness and drifted several meters to one side to grab onto Niko’s hand. She seemed half-conscious herself, but the hand in his squeezed back weakly.

“...Niko.” He gently pulled the petite avatar into his arms. She was so thoroughly battered, it was surprising she still had anything left in her health gauge. He wouldn’t let go of this hand again. Not until they got back to the real world from the Unlimited Neutral Field. Hardening his resolve, he watched the falling armored tank.

If it crashed from this height, it might not be destroyed, but it would certainly be shocked into immobility. While it was, they would get back the original Enhanced Armament with Lime Bell's Citron Call—this time for sure. And then it would all be over—

"Deel...rrrraaaaaoooooooooh!!" Suddenly, the thunderous roar filled the sky.

Pakunk! The tank emitted a strange noise and peeled apart into top and bottom. The metal armor wriggled frantically, changing shape. The upper half into a torso. The lower half into two legs. In mere seconds, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, had returned to its original human form, the shutter covering the eye of its head wide open.

A reddish-black light flickered fiercely inside the fifty-centimeter hole. A dense aura mixing hatred and rage and all kinds of other negative emotions wrapped around the massive body of Mark II. The two arms were powerfully thrust forward. The two gun barrels drew a double cross with inky particles.

...Crap...It's already recharged, Haruyuki thought, dumbfounded, and the double nihilistic lasers were fired with a roar.

Special-attack gauge: zero. Incarnate energy: zero. It was all he could do to keep hovering in midair as the two great lances shining the color of blood and darkness fused into one and closed in on him at a ferocious speed. His only option was to stare at the torrent, the tidal wave powerful enough to erase all of creation—

No. Don't give up. You have to fly. Maybe you've used up all your energy, but as long as your wings still move, you have to push a little more, a little higher, a little farther...!

Skreeeeee!! Abruptly, the dry sound of a lightning strike filled Haruyuki's consciousness.

This is.

The sound of acceleration.

There was nothing.

His consciousness alone wandered in the infinite darkness from which all light, sound, and even physical sensation had disappeared. Was he dead? Had he failed to avoid the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II's guns and been evaporated together with Niko?

No. If he'd died in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he would have simply shifted to a standby state, waiting for regeneration in sixty minutes. The world would indeed have lost its color, but he would have been able to clearly see the scene around him. But no matter how wide he opened his eyes or how hard he squinted, he could see nothing beyond this long darkness. It went without saying that his own avatar was gone, but even the health gauge and special-attack gauge in the upper left of his field of view had been extinguished.

"...Niko," he called softly, but there was no response. Fumbling around, he couldn't tell if his own arms actually existed. "Taku, Chiyu...Pard..." His unease ballooning, he called his comrades. "Kuroyukihime...Master...Mei...Curren..."

But the world remained wrapped in cold silence. Actually, he couldn't even feel temperature or the flow of air. The only word that fit this place was *nothing*. Had some anomaly occurred in the Brain Burst program, and had his spirit fallen into a place stuck between the worlds? Would he live in an infinite solitude in this endless darkness, going nowhere, seeing no one?

"Someone...? Anyone? Answer me!" Haruyuki raised a desperate voice, suddenly seized by the fear that the very mind aware of this nothing space might disappear, too. "Chiyu...Niko...Rin...Kuroyukihime..."

But his cries were futile. Absorbed into the darkness, they disappeared without so much as an echo. Wrapping his nonexistent arms tightly around his nonexistent body, he said in the weakest of voices, "Metatron..."

And suddenly, a single point of the tiniest light appeared soundlessly before his eyes. A single photon with no mass or even size. But it was definitely there. Focusing his entire self on the faintly

shining dot, he started to speak ever so timidly.

“Metatron...? Is that you...?”

The dot fluffed out and turned into a small ring. When he looked very closely at the circle of white light, it appeared to be vibrating slightly. Wondering if maybe anything else had materialized, he started to look away, but the vibrations grew larger and larger, making it harder to keep his eyes on the ring. He hurriedly readjusted his gaze, and the ring stabilized once more. It seemed that if his consciousness wasn't focused on it, he would slip out of harmony with the ring.

“Please, Metatron. If that’s you, respond to my voice.” Haruyuki synced his entire being to the ring, which was not even a millimeter across.

The ring slowly grew larger—or else Haruyuki started to shrink. Finally, the expansion stopped, and something hazy materialized beneath it. He hesitantly reached an invisible hand out to the mass of particles that were again diffusing hazily, trying to take some kind of shape—and touched it.

Hyoon! The particles clumped together and began to trace out a human shape—a semitransparent female figure. He'd seen this noble face, eyes closed, just once before. There was no mistake; this was the true form of the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron that had appeared after the fierce battle at Midtown Tower. Were there only two wings stretching out from the back of the thin dress, instead of the four from the last time he'd see her, because she'd lent half to Haruyuki?

“...Meta...tron...?” he murmured, and as if in response, the inhuman beauty slowly lifted her eyelids.

Two glittering gold eyes caught sight of Haruyuki's mind. And then the ring above the girl's—Metatron's—head scattered in a dazzling circle of light that passed his consciousness, and the body of Silver Crow materialized, as if this light had given emptiness reality. Like Metatron, he was composed of particles of light and was more than semitransparent, but at any rate, he had physical sensation again, and he could clench his hands.

“.....”

Heaving a sigh of relief from the avatar, which felt like it existed once more, Haruyuki brought his hands up to touch Metatron again.

“Insolent creature!” The sharp reprimand echoed in the empty space, and his hand was repelled with a snap. Eyelids lowered once more, the female-type Enemy arched her thin eyebrows ever so slightly and continued in a hard voice, *“You mustn't touch me so casually. Have you forgotten that you are my servant?”*

“Huh...? Servant...?” Cocking his head to one side, he finally

remembered. Now that she mentioned it, when they were hiding from the knight Enemy guarding the Acceleration Research Society headquarters, he *had* maybe gotten carried away and made a promise like that. Had he promised her a thousand minutes or a thousand hours or—no, now wasn't the time for that. "S-sorry. I just wanted to check. Um, you're Metatron...right?"

"That is obvious. I shall forgive you for omitting my title, but I am your master, after all. Ensure that you can be aware of me without touching or looking at me."

"R-right."

"To begin with, why did you not call my name immediately? If you had, we would have been able to synchronize much sooner."

"Uh...Um..."

Apparently, she was not happy that, after awakening in this nothing space, Haruyuki had called Metatron's name only after those of Chiyuri, Takumu, Kuroyukihime, Niko, and his other comrades. But there was nothing to be done about that now. All he could do was apologize. "I-I'm sorry. I never thought you'd actually answer me, so..."

"And that is why I tell you that you are a fool! There is no other presence able to have a rapport with you at this level other than me."

"L-level? I'm still just level five, though..."

Metatron's eyebrows shot up again. *"I have no interest in such trivialities as the ranking of you little warriors! The level I speak of is, to wit, an awareness high enough, deep enough to know this world...You are currently looking at the world from a standard that is most certainly not normally reached with the body of a tiny warrior."*

"...High..." Haruyuki got that she was not referring simply to altitude in the Unlimited Neutral Field. That said, however, he had no idea what she was actually talking about. He looked around timidly, but there remained as before nothing other than his own self and Metatron drawn out in light particles. He looked down at his feet, and there, too, was only the endless inky darkness.

"Oh!" Here, Haruyuki finally remembered his dire situation right before he'd fallen into this space of nothingness, this "level" Metatron spoke of. "R-right! Mark II's laser!! I—I—I was about to take a direct hit, and then..." A shudder of terror ran through him—the fear that the nihilistic great lance might break through the darkness at his feet and slam into him even now.

"This Mark II," Metatron responded evenly, cocking her head slightly to one side. *"Would that be the pseudo-Being you little ones were fighting?"*

"Uh, um...I...think so..."

"Mmm. In that case, the fight is not yet over. Look down, very

carefully.” Metatron waved her right hand lightly. Particles of pure-white light danced around as if to illuminate the scene, and beneath them, a pillar of muddy reddish-black particles appeared.

The pillar was diagonal—static in midair. It didn’t look to be moving, but the minute particles composing it squirmed and wiggled like a collection of tiny insects, and he felt an almost physical disgust.

“Wh-what’s that?”

“The void attack launched by that Mark II or whatever you call it, of course. Simply looking at it is quite odious...It’s quite astounding, actually, that it is able to produce such an abominable power.”

“Huh? S-so then, that black pillar is Mark II’s nihilistic laser?! Why’s it stopped?”

“To be more precise, you only feel that it is stopped. Further open your domain of awareness,” she instructed.

He wasn’t too sure how to do that exactly, but he opened his eyes wide at any rate—and intently so. Far below, he saw a mass even denser and more enormous than the reddish-black pillar. It was basically black, but the center held a silver light just a little darker than Haruyuki. If that was Mark II, then was the silver in the center maybe Wolfram Cerberus still in the cockpit?

If I can see Cerberus..., he thought, running his gaze along the horizon, where he found an assembly of particles shining a transparent red some ways off. Convinced that this was Niko, he moved to approach her, but Metatron stopped him.

“It’s pointless. At this level, you cannot interact with your little comrade warriors nor, of course, the enemy presence. All that is possible is to simply be aware.”

“O-oh. Um, so then is that maybe the same logic as to how you can’t move things in the real world while in the Blue World when you first accelerate?”

“I am unfamiliar with these terms, but if that is what you think, then it is likely so,” Metatron replied curtly, moving her haze to stand to his immediate right. *“Now, we will further expand the domain of awareness.”*

“Huh? ...Ah...Whoa?!” Haruyuki let out this slightly pathetic cry because Metatron suddenly grabbed hold of his right arm. He didn’t even have time to finish the thought *But she told me not to just go touching her* before the Archangel was yanking him up and ascending rapidly. “I-if we’re gonna fly, then say we’re gonna—”

Before he could even finish his grumbled protest, they stopped abruptly. He had the curious feeling that inertia was not at work in any way both when they started and stopped moving, but he assumed that was just the way it was here and glanced over to his side.

Now that he was thinking about it, this female-type avatar, Metatron’s second form, had appeared before him for only a few

seconds immediately after the fierce fight with her first form at Midtown Tower. At the time, he'd been shaking so hard from the extraordinarily intimidating air of the body that had suddenly appeared, he hadn't been able to get a good look at her. But now that he was looking at her again up close, he was at a loss for words as to how to describe her supernatural beauty—not even the word *perfection* was close to adequate.

Even though she was nothing but particles of white light, he was overcome by a sensation like his soul was being knocked out of him. *If this is her form in the Unlimited Neutral Field, then it's no wonder I passed out— No, no, I can't think about this now. I mean, I have Kuroyukihime and all...*

"If you gaze upon me for too long, you will develop impairments in your cognitive abilities."

"Oh! I-I'm sorry!" Haruyuki nearly followed this apology with a remark about how Metatron was apparently capable of jokes, but she could have simply been telling the truth, so he hurriedly averted his eyes.

When he looked down, they seemed a fair bit higher up than before. The nihilistic laser stagnating in midair, Mark II that fired it, and the floating Niko were all nothing more than pinpoints now. Squinting, he noticed a dot of crimson light on the inky horizontal far, far below—most likely the ground. From the color, it had to have been Blood Leopard.

In which case, he thought, turning his awareness out to an even greater sphere. There he found spots of green and blue on the same horizon as Pard but much farther off. That would be Chiyuri and Takumu.

"Hmm. It seems you're now able to see, more or less, yes?"

"Y-yeah, well, I guess. But I still have no idea what exactly this world is." Scrolling back through his memory, he felt like he'd heard the sound of acceleration—the same one as when he gave the Burst Link command, immediately before he shifted to this static, pitch-black space. But of course, it had only *sounded* like that lightning strike. If it had been the acceleration sound, he was in big trouble.

"We call this place the Highest Level," Metatron informed him.

"Highest...Level," he parroted back. "So then, what is the Unlimited Neutral Field where I was fighting until a minute ago?"

"The Mean Level."

"Huh..." That word *mean*. He was pretty sure it also meant *midway* on top of the usual *significance* meaning. In which case, he was curious about what the normal duel field below that and the real world even lower down would be called. But he got the feeling she'd get mad at him again if he kept asking questions, so he shelved them

and looked out at the world of the Highest Level again. Although he'd only been aware of the monotonous darkness at first, now he could at least tell the difference between earth and sky.

When he stared at the ground, it seemed that the terrain was roughly reproduced on this level as well. The line running along the left side of the crater made by Mark II was probably the expressway. Which meant that Haruyuki and Metatron were facing due north.

He turned his gaze upward to find four points of light clumped together a fair distance to the north. They weren't as high up as Haruyuki and Metatron, but they were still at a considerable altitude. Sky blue, scarlet, pale blue—and black. Black but totally different from the muddled darkness of Mark II; it had the quality of transparent motion.

"Kuroyukihime!" There was no mistake. The spot of black light was Kuroyukihime—Black Lotus. Which meant the other lights were Fuko, Akira, and Utai. They were probably hanging in the air because Fuko was carrying the others with her Gale Thruster.

The four had remained at Midtown Tower in order to pull out Niko's cable in the real world. So were they apparently moving toward Haruyuki and his comrades because they had witnessed Mark II's first large explosion and suspected something out of the ordinary was going on? But even with Gale Thruster, Sky Raker would never be able to carry the weight of four people all the way here in one flight. It would be ten minutes at the very least before the arrival of reinforcements.

No. Counting on Kuroyukihime and the others to rescue us and deactivate the armor is a fantasy. We'll finish this all up before they arrive and greet them with smiles.

"Thank you, Kuroyukihime. But I'm okay. The Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, we'll definitely—" His murmuring was forcibly cut off because, once again, Metatron had grabbed his arm and started to ascend rapidly.

"Aaaaah!" he cried as he was yanked upward to what he perceived to be an altitude of over one thousand meters, where they again stopped abruptly with no concern for momentum or inertia.

"Now," the Archangel announced in a somewhat colder voice—or maybe that was just in his mind. *"Even you should be able to see the true form at this point."*

"Huh? Tr-true form?" He blinked hard several times and stared intently at the archangel. Nothing in the beauty of her face in profile, eyelashes lowered, seemed different from a moment ago. Twisting his neck, he unconsciously raised his right hand and went to poke the smooth line of her cheek.

"Insolence!!"

Whap! She slapped the palm of his hand away with the tip of a wing, and Haruyuki swallowed a yelp as he leapt back.

"I-it's just—I don't know what's different, so..."

"I speak not of me!" the Archangel rebuked him sharply before gesturing toward the space below them with both hands. *"You must use all your awareness and look at the world. You have put this into practice many times in the battle up to now. Broaden that sensation, deepen it, heighten it, extend it. Expand in every direction."*

Metatron wasn't making too much sense to him, but even so, he felt like he got about half of what she was trying to say.

Look. Not at one point; at the whole. Not for a moment; continuously. In the Accelerated World, Haruyuki and the other Burst Linkers didn't actually see with their eyes. Their avatars did have eyes, but it wasn't as though these were connected directly to their real eyes. Their consciousness itself saw, heard, touched, and felt the world generated by the Brain Burst central server—also known as the Main Visualizer—through their Neurolinkers. This world, the Highest Level, was likely a place that expressed the elements that made up the Accelerated World in a form closer to their true nature. A world where things weren't translated into easy-to-understand 3-D objects—where information itself flowed and drifted.

Haruyuki had unconsciously closed his eyes the way Metatron did. Despite the fact that when he blinked before, it had interrupted his vision, and he was able to perceive the world hazily now with his eyes closed. The earth a distant thousand meters below. Pard, Takumu, and Chiyuri there. Mark II floating in the air. Niko even higher up. Far off in the distance, Fuko, Utai, Akira, and Kuroyukihime.

That wasn't all. He could even see down into the basement of the Acceleration Research Society hideout beneath the crater Mark II had made; it was far deeper and bigger than he'd thought. And the knight Enemies on guard—there were three, no, four.

His power of perception popped aboveground once more and spread out horizontally. He could feel in detail the terrain of the Minato Ward Area, right down to each and every building. When he reached a wide street running to the northwest, the tower that soared up remarkably high was probably the old Tokyo Tower. Fufuan at its peak was like a particle of sand compared with the large-scale terrain around it, but it felt warm somehow. And immediately beside the house, something whirling, smaller than the house, but which had a higher density of information. That had to be the portal.

Four small flying Enemies were suspended in the sky even farther north of the tower. When he expanded his range of perception, he found an infinite number of other Enemies. Large ones, small ones, hot ones, cold ones...And more than a few appeared to be

approaching the crater that was the battlefield for Haruyuki and his comrades. They were probably drawn in by the Incarnate techniques activated in succession by both sides. He had to end this battle before they came charging in.

Haruyuki slowly lifted his eyelids. “Whoa...Ah...!” A faint moan slipped out of his mouth.

The world had changed phases completely. On the ground outside the crater where there had been nothing but darkness, infinite points of light were scattered; it glittered like a starry sky. Most of the particles of white light were distributed along the roads, but some were also in large buildings and every nook and cranny of the plazas. It was utterly impossible to count them all. Naturally, the areas beyond Minato were similarly filled with light, and the whole effect was like an art piece drawing central Tokyo in stardust.

“What are those lights?” Haruyuki asked.

“*We call them nodes,*” Metatron answered quietly. “*The places where the information that decides the shape of the world is born, connected, and flows.*”

“The shape...of the world...,” he parroted back before the true gravity of the statement hit him, eliciting a gasp. The arrangement of those lights that could have been ordered or were random was probably... “The social cameras?”

It took the form of a question, but Haruyuki was already certain of the idea. The network of automatic monitoring devices placed in every inch of every public space in the real world with the goal of maintaining public safety. They were social security-surveillance cameras—social cameras.

The Brain Burst program hacked the images captured by this monitoring network to produce duel fields that re-created the reality of the terrain in real time, so of course they were “deciding the shape of this world.” Information regarding the social camera network was strictly guarded, and there was no way for the general population—Haruyuki included—to find out how many cameras there were or where the facility was that aggregated and processed the information. There were some sites online that collected information on the position of the cameras, but there was also a theory that the cameras that could be seen with the eye made up less than half the total, with the majority being skillfully hidden. As far as he could see looking down on the distribution of lights from the Highest Level, that theory appeared to be correct. The white stardust shone with a density that was two—no, three times the layout of cameras he had found in town on his own.

Tokyo depicted in this vast number of points of lights visibly demonstrated the excessive monitoring of the people of the city, but at

the same time, it was so beautiful that it took his breath away. As he shifted his gaze along a line of lights that shone even more brightly—probably the Yamanote Line—from Minato to Shibuya and on to Shinjuku, Haruyuki realized something.

“Huh?” The center of Tokyo, the very middle of the Chiyoda Ward Area, was alone sunken into inky darkness. No matter how he strained his eyes, he couldn’t pick out a single speck of stardust. But that was impossible. That was the imperial palace in the real world, one of the most heavily guarded places in the city. Obviously, there had to have been any number of social cameras in it; it should have been shining like the center of the Milky Way in this world. So why was there not even a hint of light there? It was almost like a super-massive black hole had eaten away the center of the galaxy.

“*You seem to have noticed, hmm?*” Metatron whispered. He glanced over at her. The Archangel still had her eyes closed, but Haruyuki strongly felt that her gaze was turned toward the darkness at the center of Chiyoda. “*That place alone—the space that you little warriors call the Castle—is completely cut off from the world. Even with my own powers of perception, I can sense nothing of the inside.*”

“Cut off? But, um...” Haruyuki struggled with whether it was okay to talk about this before timidly finishing his sentence. “I was inside the Castle just once before. It didn’t look fundamentally different inside than outside. There were buildings and Ene—I mean, Beings, and it had the same attribute as the outside world...”

“.....”

Unusually, Metatron hesitated, and then she nodded gently. “*I know that you entered the Castle from previous observations. The reason I spoke to you during your battle with my first form...and why I invited you to this Highest Level is indeed because of this fact.*”

“What?!” he cried out unconsciously, stunned.

Metatron slowly turned to face Haruyuki directly. Her eyelids were raised ever so slightly, and glittering gold eyes pierced Haruyuki’s own, right down to his soul. Inside his head, a clear, solemn voice echoed. “*Warrior Silver Crow.*”

Without even realizing this was the first time Metatron had called him by his name rather than *you*, Haruyuki simply waited for her to continue.

“*I, Metatron, one pillar of the Four Saints, suggest an exchange. I shall deliver unto you the destruction of that pseudo-Being.*”

And then he remembered all over again. Right now, at this moment, he was on the verge of taking a direct hit from the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II’s nihilistic laser in the Unlimited Neutral Field—what Metatron called the Mean Level. To be honest, he had no idea how to avoid that attack. If Metatron said she would help him, he

couldn't very well refuse. But what bothered him was the "exchange." Meaning that Haruyuki would also have to offer something in return for her help.

"What do I need to do?" he asked fearfully. He was completely unprepared for the Archangel's response.

"You will allow me to reference your memories of the inside of the Castle."

"R-reference...my memories? That's all?" he asked, but then he gasped in realization. "Um, that—does that mean my memories will be gone?"

"I said reference, did I not?" she snapped in reply. *"I will only look; I will not erase. To begin with, if I had such privileges as to erase memories, I would browse them without bothering with this exchange."*

"I—I guess so. Um..." He shrank back. *Did I do anything embarrassing inside the Castle? No, no, I'm talking to an Enemy—a Being here; there's no need to be embarrassed about anything.* His thoughts quickly ran through the possibilities, and then he nodded. "I'm fine with that. In fact, I'd actually like you to...But how am I supposed to show you my memories?"

"Good. With these words, the contract is made," Metatron announced in a tone that brooked no argument, rather than answering Haruyuki's question, and stretched out her hands. She wrapped her fingers around the dots of silver light that made up Silver Crow's helmet. Although her fingers were so slender that he hesitated to even touch them, they held his entire body perfectly in place; he was unable to move hands or feet.

"Huh? Uh, wh-wh-what...?"

"Quiet. Calm your mind and accept me." She had no sooner given him this order than Archangel Metatron was touching her own face to Haruyuki's helmet.

Gaaaaah?! he very nearly shouted, but desperately controlled himself, and Metatron's fierce beauty slipped soundlessly through Silver Crow's mirrored visor. Her golden eyes peered into his from extremely close-up, while she touched their faces firmly together. Haruyuki's mental circuitry shorted, shooting out sparks, and he was unable to think about anything.

And then the core of his mind overflowed with a golden light. In this shining haze, several still images flashed up, one after another.

The God Suzaku hanging in the air against the backdrop of the Castle's south gate.

Haruyuki charging into the south gate with Ardor Maiden in his arms.

The interior of the Castle—autumn colors dancing in the Heian

stage.

The blue samurai avatar they met inside.

And the space at the very deepest level after descending steep stairs, sealed off by a massive sacred rope, and the golden light that flickered on the other side of the darkness...

“I have indeed been shown your memories.”

He returned to himself with a gasp. Metatron had already pulled her face away from his. But her hands were still pressed against his helmet, and her inhuman beauty was still right in front of him.

“I see...” A faint voice spilled from her graceful lips. *“The Shrine of the Eight Divines. So then there are Beings in the depths of the Castle who surpass even the Four Gods...”*

“Huh? Um, just now, what...?”

“To obtain more information than this, it seems I will need to contact this Azure Air. Does this mean that the time to face the Four Gods has come at last? ...But at the moment, it’s still...”

He couldn’t tell if these words were really coming from Metatron’s mouth. Because the instant her body pulled away, he suddenly couldn’t hear them anymore. Or perhaps it was her thoughts that were being communicated to him, but she was an Enemy (Being), a program— What on earth would she be thinking about?



“Um.” Haruyuki took in the figure of the standing Archangel once more and asked timidly, “Why are you interested in the Castle?”

Metatron turned a cool gaze on him, as if to say this was a meaningless question. But in his mind, Metatron, the Four Gods, and the Castle all existed on the system side, so they seemed equal to him in their most fundamental form. As if reading these thoughts, the beautiful woman, snowy-white and luminescent, closed her eyes once more and turned her face to the galaxy on the ground.

“When I gained existence in this world, I was a simple Being who only followed the orders I was given.” Haruyuki heard a somewhat desolate yet quiet voice in his mind. *“I waited for little warriors to visit the deepest level of the Contrary Cathedral, my domain in Area three-zero-two, and I fought them. That was everything I was intended to do.”*

Haruyuki had never once been to Metatron’s castle, the Shibakoen underground labyrinth. It was the largest, most difficult dungeon in the Unlimited Neutral Field, so there had never been that many Burst Linkers daring to tackle it. Even if an attack was launched every weekend, seven days in the real world was seven thousand days in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Metatron must have been waiting patiently for enemies that only appeared once every twenty years. He turned his eyes toward her once more, but the Archangel continued with an aloof look:

“A long, long time passed, until finally, warriors appeared to crush my first form in Field Attribution UH-zero-one—what you little ones call the Hell stage. But when they departed with one of the Seven Arcs from the throne room, the frequency of the little warriors visiting my castle dropped even further. With no chance to exert my abilities as my second form, time equivalent to an eternity passed again. At some point, I began to think. I... What exactly was this consciousness that I had been given under the name Metatron? What being had produced me and given me this vain mission? And for what purpose did the world I perceived exist?”

“.....!!”

Haruyuki gasped. Metatron’s monologue was shocking in two ways. One was that Metatron, an Enemy (Being) in the Accelerated World, doubted the reason for her own existence. Her intelligence had indeed reached a level that far surpassed the domain of a program within the game. And the second was that someone had said very similar words to Haruyuki before. In the depths of his mind, a faint voice came back to life.

“Burst Linkers reaching level ten would have the chance to meet the program creator and would be told the true meaning behind the existence of Brain Burst, as well as its ultimate goal. I...I want to know. Whatever it takes, I have to know.”

Kuroyukihime had said this to him eight months earlier over a direct connection in a café near Umesato back when they had just barely met.

The creator of the program, still shrouded in mystery—this person had produced the Accelerated World, the Burst Linkers, and Enemies (Beings) like Metatron. Kuroyukihime and Metatron were both seeking the same answer from outside and inside the world.

“Did you...find the answer?” Haruyuki hoarsely posed the question to the infinitely old creature.

Wordlessly, Metatron suddenly grabbed Haruyuki’s right hand. With her other, she indicated the glittering map of light in the distance below. And then something mysterious happened.

The countless lights that gave shape to central Tokyo began to stretch out vertically, silently. As if supported by the lights, now extremely thin vertical lines, new terrain materialized. One above the Tokyo he’d first seen and one below.

Now he was looking at a triple-layered Tokyo pierced by countless white pillars. Unable to comprehend the scene before him, he muttered, dumbfounded, “Three...fields...?”

“Yes. This is the current limit of my perception. This is everything of the world that it is possible for me to know.”

“Everything...of the world...” Repeating her words, Haruyuki stared hard. And he soon noticed it.

In the center of the Tokyo that had existed from the start, there were countless colored lights flickering, in addition to the pillars of monochrome that were the social cameras. These were Enemies, dungeons, portals, shops, and the very few Burst Linkers who were diving in the Unlimited Neutral Field at that very moment. But in the newly materialized upper and lower Tokyos, there were absolutely no lights other than those of the social cameras.

Parallel worlds that had the same terrain but not a single human being, the sort of thing you might see in a science fiction movie. Or worlds in which all life had been extinguished.

“Once...In the distant past, a great number of lights moved actively in those two fields as well. No doubt, little warriors such as yourself and Beings like me fought, talked, and lived in rapport. But those lights gradually started to decrease...and then at a certain point, they had all disappeared. I also do not know what happened.”

“There are other fields above and below the Unlimited Neutral Field? So I guess the lower one’s the normal duel field...There should still be plenty of Burst Linkers fighting there now, though.”

“No.” Metatron shook her head lightly. *“Those two fields are completely different spaces from the field we belong to. They are laid upon each other, but there is no way to move between them.”*

“Different spaces? What does that mean?” Cocking his head to one side, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide and gasped. Two different worlds. He was sure he’d heard something like this from someone else before.

It was when he had that chance meeting with the Green King, Green Grandé, on the roof of Roppongi Hills Tower. The Green King had spoken about why he went hunting Enemies by himself and distributed the points to other kings without any compensation. He said he couldn’t let this world be closed. Brain Burst—also known as Trial Number Two—couldn’t be abandoned the same way Numbers One and Three had been. The names of those already shuttered worlds were...

“Accel Assault 2038 and...Cosmos Corrupt 2040,” Haruyuki murmured in a voice that was not quite audible.

Metatron reacted with a brief *“Oh? You know those names?”*

“Y-yeah. A little while ago, another Burst Linker—what you call a little warrior—told me.” *The Green King’s definitely no “little warrior,” though*, he thought in one corner of his mind.

“Is that so?” The Archangel gave a light nod. *“Well then, perhaps that warrior has also been to the Highest Level. But none of that matters now. My hypothesis is that the three fields—AA 2038, CC 2040, and BB 2039 in which we live—were all produced for the same objective.”*

“Objective?”

“Think for yourself for once. If you look closely at the three fields, you should be able to also come to this conclusion.”

“R-right. Um.” Taking his eyes off Metatron’s face in profile, Haruyuki stared at the three layers of Tokyo.

But no matter how hard he looked, the upper and lower worlds were essentially completely “closed.” The only point they shared with the world of Brain Burst was the position of the social cameras. If both Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt were hidden games like Brain Burst—and that was extremely likely given that an obsessed gamer like Haruyuki hadn’t heard of them—then both had likely produced duel stages with exactly the same structure.

So did that mean that for however many years in real time, there had been other Burst Linkers fighting in a different game world from Haruyuki and his friends in the twenty-three wards of Tokyo? He supposed they would have been Assault Linkers and Corrupt Linkers rather than Burst Linkers, but at any rate, for some reason, they had disappeared. And their memories had most likely been erased when the program was forcefully uninstalled from their Neurolinkers, so they had forgotten that they once fought in a hidden battlefield.

To what end? For what purpose had the developer of the three games given such a cruel sport to children?

Having at some point come to grip Metatron's hand tightly, Haruyuki continued to focus on the three layered worlds—or more precisely, the one world and the two ruins. And then he realized it abruptly.

The biggest commonality in the three worlds. The fact that, in all of them, the center was wrapped in inky darkness.

"There's a Castle in Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt, too?" Haruyuki said.

"So you finally noticed it then?" Metatron nodded deeply. "The name might have been different in the AA and the CC fields, but just as in our BB field, there exists an isolated space at the center. And in those two worlds as well, the little warriors apparently had this space as their final objective. In which case, that itself is the reason for this world configured in its three layers and why the little warriors and Beings who fight there were generated."

The pure-white Archangel raised her right hand up high and let her cool, clear voice echo through the infinite darkness.

"The reason for the existence of this space fusing three worlds—if I was to follow the example of you little warriors—the Accelerated World. It is to break into the Castle, a separate world in the center of this world, and the Shrine of the Eight Divines sunken in its depths and reach The Fluctuating Light sealed inside. I am confident of this."

Even after the long reverberations of Metatron's speech, like a heavenly proclamation, had disappeared, Haruyuki couldn't speak.

The Fluctuating Light—TFL. Also known as Youkou, the eta of the Seven Arcs. This was likely the most powerful Enhanced Armament, one that every Burst Linker dreamed of getting ahold of—at most, it was an item within the game, and an assault on the Shrine of the Eight Divines was also nothing more than an item-obtaining event if they charged forward on it. Or rather, that was how Haruyuki had been thinking of it. But Metatron's words upended his very mind.

TFL itself was the reason that Brain Burst, Accel Assault, and Cosmos Corrupt existed or had existed. This wasn't on the scale of a requirement to clear the game or anything like it. If she was right, then even level ten was nothing more than a step in that direction. Because the mysterious developer was unable to remove the seal on TFL, they had distributed the game program free of charge to hundreds of children. That was what Metatron was saying.

But there was a large contradiction hidden there. Given that TFL was an obtainable item in the game, it had to have been the developer who made it and placed it in the depths of the Castle. The developer had privileges equivalent to a god, so if they wanted to, they could

have moved it from the Castle or even just made another one. There was no real need to make Haruyuki and the other players attack the Castle, was there?

Or was TFL actually fundamentally different from the other six Arcs, even though it was said to be one of the seven? Not an Enhanced Armament or any other kind of item, but rather...? Right, for example...

Haruyuki finally remembered. He himself had been thinking the exact same thing before.

A little over ten days earlier, Haruyuki had charged into the Castle with Utai and met a strange young samurai avatar in the main building. Giving his name as Trilead Tetroxide, he had guided Haruyuki and Utai to the Shrine of the Eight Divines that existed deep underground in the main building. What he saw there was a golden light flickering in the distance in the vast darkness. The glow of the seventh Arc, the Enhanced Armament, The Fluctuating Light.

While he stared at the faintly pulsing light, Haruyuki had been overcome by the sensation that this wasn't the first time. When he was training in the Incarnate System at the former Tokyo Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field, as he climbed the wall, free from all other thought, he'd gotten the feeling that someone was talking to him from the other side of a flickering light—a light that was the same color and warmth as TFL.

Someone.

When he was reunited with this light in the depths of the Castle, Haruyuki felt that it was not an Enhanced Armament, but rather a mind. But then his Neurolinker had been disconnected from the global net—and his thoughts cut off. And although he wished he would get inside the Castle again someday and make good on his promise to meet Trilead Tetroxide aka Azure Air again, he still had not managed to do that.

What if what he had felt then was real? That would mean that TFL was not simply an item designed and placed by the developer, but rather something cut off from the world, even as it existed in the center of the Accelerated World? Something that could not be touched even by the hand of the developer—or *someone*.

"If...," Haruyuki murmured, staring intently at the ink-black hole that pierced the center of the triple field, "if someone did manage to break through the gates of the Four Gods and into the Shrine of the Eight Divines to touch The Fluctuating Light...What would happen?"

"Do you truly wish to know?"

"Huh?" The unexpected question made him glance at the Archangel. Her long eyelashes were again lowered, and he couldn't read what she was feeling from her aloof beauty—if Enemies (Beings)

did indeed have feelings, that was.

“.....”

He paused briefly before nodding deeply. “I do. Even if it’s the end of the world. I haven’t fought with the Black King this long to stop and stand still. I want to keep moving forward.”

When he gave voice to this thought, he belatedly realized what it indicated. If reaching TFL was the reason for the existence of Brain Burst, then someone doing that might mean they finished the game, and the Accelerated World would also vanish. If that was to happen, the time of Haruyuki Arita, who lived in the real world, would continue to flow as always, but that wasn’t necessarily the case for Metatron. For her, the end of the game might be the same as death. Unconsciously, Haruyuki squeezed the hand still in his.

Perhaps picking up his thoughts through the palms of their touching hands, the Archangel murmured quietly, *“I too wish to know. The meaning of the seventy-one million five hundred ninety-two thousand three hundred nineteen hours from the time I awoke in this world until now. Even if...it means the extinction of my existence in exchange.”*

“...Metatron...” Haruyuki could do nothing more than say her name in a strained voice.

The Accelerated World had been born in 2039. Eight years had passed since. That alone felt like a very long time to Haruyuki, but living in the Accelerated World as she did, Metatron had passed through a thousand times that time—eight thousand years. A year was about 8,760 hours, so eight thousand times that was just as Metatron said, a little over 70 million hours. A length of time that was basically equivalent to eternity.

Dropping his eyes down to the triple galaxy glittering silently below, he gave voice to the words that rose up from the depths of his heart. “Um, so I promised to be your servant for a thousand years, right? So...I wish you wouldn’t disappear before I can keep that promise...I guess...”

“...You say such foolish things, as always. You haven’t even broken through the outer gates of the Castle yet; you won’t be able to conquer the Shrine of the Eight Divines in a mere thousand years. I do not need you to tell me that you will be serving me for a thousand years.” After this cold utterance, Metatron softened her tone the slightest bit. *“However, earlier, you submitted what I requested. Thus, I shall also make my gift.”*

“Huh?” What was she going to give him? Haruyuki felt the stirrings of a worldly desire, while Metatron led his gaze downward.

“The technique to defeat that pseudo-Being.”

These words instantly brought him back to reality, and he unconsciously stiffened his shoulders. It wasn’t as though he’d forgotten, but the actual body of Silver Crow frozen in the sky above

the Minato Ward Area of the Unlimited Neutral Field was about to take a direct hit from the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II's nihilistic laser. It seemed that time was essentially stopped here in the Highest Level, but a half second after he returned to what Metatron called the Mean Level, the jet-black great lance would slam into him.

"It's not that I don't trust you, but...in that situation, how...?" he asked timidly.

"That is truly a disgusting and abominable object, but the amount of empty energy it contains is so great that even I am barely able to measure it," Metatron replied, sounding slightly sterner. *"If you err in your response, you will be instantly disassembled along with your armor."*

"D-disassembled...How can I not be...?"

"You must destroy it with a force of the opposite affiliation, of course. The void attack launched by the pseudo-Being and the body itself below that."

"Opposite...affiliation..."

In the Accelerated World, the nihilistic (dark) affiliation was paired with the light affiliation. And Haruyuki had the long-distance, light Incarnate technique, Light Javelin. But he was still developing that, so it took a while to activate, and the precision of the sight was still soft. And more than anything else, it unfortunately did not have the power nor the range to pierce the body in the distance on top of erasing the nihilistic laser fired from Mark II's main guns.

"Um. I don't want to give up before I've even started, but with the techniques I have now, that kind of power— To start with, I don't think I could even fire before I took that direct hit..." Haruyuki admitted quietly, hanging his head, and his hand, still caught in Metatron's, was squeezed with a merciless force. He didn't have a health gauge on the Highest Level, so he assumed he wasn't taking damage, but even so, he reflexively cried out in pain. "Ow-ow-ow-ow!"

The mighty Archangel arched her beautiful eyebrows above still-closed eyelids and snapped, *"Listen to me. You are the servant of one of the Four Saints, so refrain from such fainthearted words and deeds. I say it is possible, so it is indeed possible!"*

"O-okay."

This is like getting chewed out by Kuroyukihime now. He gave himself over to these sorts of feelings, now at this late stage, while Metatron tugged on his hand again and turned them ninety degrees to the right. At the same time, she shifted her own position to face him once again.

Then she wordlessly turned her right palm out and offered it to him, so Haruyuki also nervously brought his left up to press on the slender hand. Their palms were now connected, but Metatron stayed ensconced in silence. If this were folk-dancing practice in gym class,

this is when “Turkey in the Straw” would have played, but of course, the dark world remained replete with silence.

After nearly ten seconds had passed in Haruyuki’s subjective time, Metatron finally spoke. *“I am aware that you currently do not have the power to destroy that pseudo-Being. And the power of the wings I have lent you, Ektenia, also cannot pierce that dense void. That technique was originally one for broad-range annihilation that my first form releases simultaneously from my many wings.”*

“R-right. But it was plenty strong. It’s helped me out a bunch of times. Tha—”

“I’m telling you it is not that impressive!” the eight-thousand-year-old Legend-class Enemy Haruyuki told him indignantly, then paused briefly before continuing. *“I am in rapport with you now through my wings. My actual self in the Mean Level has already returned to the deepest stratum of my domain, so I am not able to come to your battleground. But there exists a means of manifesting my power through your body.”*

“Through me...Your power?”

“This is now the only way to pierce that nothingness and destroy the enemy.”

Metatron’s speech made Haruyuki remember once more the days he had passed at the old Tokyo Tower. Still holding her hand, he pulled his head back and asked timidly, “Um, are we maybe going to do some kind of training here or something?”

“I suppose we might, if you so desire. However, if we stay too long in this Highest Level, it will become difficult to return to the lower level. In fact, three thousand years or so ago, I lost sight of the way back and had some bit of trouble myself.”

“S-so no training then! ...But then what exactly is this way?” Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, and before his eyes, the Archangel threw her slender body back and unfurled her double wings.

“Listen to me, little warrior. On the Highest Level, the concept of ‘distance’ is meaningless. Thus, it is possible for us two to touch like this, despite the fact that we are far apart on the Mean Level; for us to have this overview of all three fields; and to even reference memories. But there still exists a definite ‘gap’ between you and me. That is the movement of the mind to protect and maintain the very existence of our selves...This is the most primordial energy of what you little ones call the Incarnate System.”

“The Incarnate...source...” Although what Metatron was saying was difficult, he also felt like he understood it instinctively.

A firmly focused imagination overwrote phenomena. That was the basic gist of the Incarnate System. But most likely, the majority of Burst Linkers were always imagining something without realizing it themselves: a wall to protect their own heart. A hard shell built up

around the soft, easily hurt soul...The duel avatar was produced with mental scars as the mold. Put another way, it was the armor Burst Linkers produced and wrapped around themselves—a weapon.

Haruyuki had thought the Brain Burst program created the duel avatars. That the night of the day you installed the program, it called up the trauma in your heart in the form of a nightmare and went ahead and designed your avatar from that image. But that might not actually have been the case. Maybe the Burst Linkers themselves strongly imagined a presence in the dream that would protect them and made *that* incarnate.

In which case, the duel avatar–birth process was the Incarnate System itself. Every Burst Linker used Incarnate in the first moment of becoming a Burst Linker. Those wishing for power in their own hands were blue types; those wishing for power to reach the distance were red types. Those wishing for the power to protect themselves and their comrades were green types; while those who desperately wanted not power, but a hard shell, were metal colors. And forever after that, without being aware of it, they all worked to maintain the form of their duel avatars with the power of Incarnate.

“Metatron.” Haruyuki looked at the beautiful angel whose hands were connected with his own. “You said you can hear the sound of the Incarnate System, right? So then...the sound of me protecting my heart is probably...super-earsplitting?”

“Why would you think that?”

“...I’m one of the few metal colors in the Accelerated World—I have metal armor. And that’s proof I want to protect my heart much more strongly than other people. That I don’t want to defeat enemies or save my comrades...I just want to wrap my own self up in a hard shell. There’s no way this sound of mine isn’t despicable.”

Haruyuki thought she would definitely get mad at him over this excessively self-deprecating line. But the Archangel replied without changing her tone or expression.

“I do not feel the individual differences between you little warriors as beautiful or despicable or any such thing. At any rate, I cannot go against my orders to destroy you while I am in my first form, so it is pointless to wonder how I feel.”

“...Oh...”

“However, I am able to decide whether I like or dislike all things, including you little ones. For instance, the other Four Saints are precious, and I do not care for the Four Gods of the Castle. I like the Twilight stage, but I despise the Hell stage. I can state that the pseudo-Being you are fighting is repulsive, and I believe that the next time I encounter the little warrior who twisted the power of the jeweled crown, The Luminary, that they stole from my domain and then dared to go so far as make me their

guard dog after using it on me, I will spend approximately three thousand years evaporating them."

Y-you will...huh? Haruyuki thought in a corner of his mind, shuddering. The silver crown that had restrained Metatron's first form and the knight Enemy he had seen in the Society's headquarters...That was apparently the effect of The Luminary, one of the Seven Arcs. Which meant The Luminary, said to be missing, was actually in the hands of the Society?

This bit of information nagged at him still, but right now he needed to focus on Mark II. Staring at Metatron's face, he asked again, "So then...What's my sound...?"

Metatron kept her mouth closed for a while, but then finally spoke in a slightly quieter voice. *"At the very least, I do not enjoy this question."*

"I-I'm sorry. You don't have to answer—"

"You must be able to discern it without asking such tiresome questions. Why would I make one who emitted an unpleasant noise my servant for a thousand years?"

"I-I'm really sorry. Wait. So then, what—?"

"Aah, really! Do you actually have such leeway as to make this kind of conversation with me?! I only just explained to you the damage from staying too long in the Highest Level!"

"R-right, you did."

What were we talking about again? After thinking a second, he finally remembered. Metatron was talking about the gap between them. The mental wall everyone generated deep in their unconscious mind. This was, in other words... "Um. So then...Is what's separating you and me the armor of this duel avatar itself?"

"Aye. Essentially, there is no need for armor or swords in this Highest Level. Because nothing can hurt you here. However, you have produced this same figure as on the Mean Level. As long as you have this awareness, I will not be able to share my own power with you."

"B-but I mean, how am I supposed to...?" Haruyuki had already been fighting as Silver Crow for eight months. This figure was the most natural form to take while he was in the Accelerated World. Metatron said it was a manifestation of the mind to try to protect himself, but he had absolutely no awareness of this. "A-and I mean, you—you look the same as when we were in the Unlimited Neutral Field, though. It's not like I'm the only one creating this gap..." Haruyuki started muttering.

Metatron's brow furrowed into a deep valley, a meter before him. But fortunately, the Archangel did not reprimand him. Instead, she hung her head and said half to herself, *"It is indeed just as you say. There is something in me that could be called pride or boastfulness as a*

Saint, and it is that which is producing this form. But the time has come now to discard such shells. When I loaned you my wings, I made the choice to end a long stagnation."

Metatron turned her face up, eyes still closed. Following her lead, Haruyuki also turned his face up. He couldn't find a speck of light in the jet-black canopy. No; he wasn't even sure if the sky was there or not. An endless spiritual darkness.

In a certain sense, the infinite sky was equivalent to a tough prison. Because either way, the fact that he couldn't go anywhere was the same. And eternal time was equal to one second on a loop. The end was definitely not coming.

When he had awakened his flight ability and soared through the air of the duel stage for the first time, Haruyuki had felt it. That this world was infinite. But the Purgatory stage of Suginami Area No. 2 that had seemed so endlessly vast then was nothing more than the single smallest section of the Accelerated World. Above it were the Unlimited Neutral Field and the Highest Level, with its three overlapping worlds. Metatron had been held prisoner in an infinite and eternal prison, all without knowing why she had been born or the purpose of her fight.

Abruptly, a pillar of golden light rose vertically in front of him. Turning his gaze back, he found that the beautiful robe wrapped around Metatron was in the process of soundlessly vanishing. As the hem and sleeves melted into particles of light, the smooth lines of her body were revealed.

If this had been the Haruyuki of only a little while ago, he might have yanked his hand out of hers. But now, he only felt a sadness that pressed heavy on his chest.

A Legend-class Enemy with absolute power on par with the Four Gods of the Castle. The polar opposite of mere level-five Haruyuki in every way. But there was one thing they shared: The desire to see the edge of the Accelerated World. The desire to fly faster, farther, ever forward.

He didn't need armor anymore, if that was all he wanted. He broke the shell that protected his soul and took a step toward her. He would allow the heart of a precious friend who shared the same dream to touch his own.

Silver light gently danced up from his body as well. The particles that made up Silver Crow's armor were melting away. The naked body of his slender avatar was revealed, and then it further transformed into the real-world Haruyuki. The light rising up from their two bodies passed through their firmly linked arms and touched in their palms. Instantly, the circle this made flashed brightly and illuminated the infinite darkness with a ring of light.

Metatron slowly raised her eyelids and opened them completely for the first time. The golden eyes caught Haruyuki's squarely, and the jet-black was painted over in a snowy white. Their two bodies melted into light, and just like when he first came to this Highest Level, his sense of sight and hearing and all other sensations disappeared and were lost. But Haruyuki felt it: another heart beating very close to his own.

The two hearts drew near each other. And touched.

Haruyuki couldn't have known this, but in that instant, a change occurred inside the device called the Brain Burst central server—the Main Visualizer. The Brain Burst program raised the clock on the light quantum circuits inside that brain—the true matter of consciousness—and realized a thought speed of one thousand times faster. But this explanation was not the entire truth. Being accelerated was an intracerebral circuit interface that accepted a connection with the Main Visualizer via the Neurolinker. This communication was carried out not through the general-use global net, but rather through the nonpublic, super-high-speed, and high-capacity social camera net. And from accelerated Burst Linkers thought to be using their own dedicated quantum circuit within the Main Visualizer.

Right now, the quantum circuit with the name Metatron—one of the lights shining especially brightly in the galaxy Haruyuki once saw in "Takumu's dream"—and Haruyuki's own dedicated quantum circuit were connected in a new network. This phenomenon resembled the parallel processing that happened with the ISS kit main body and the kit users, but the nature of it was very different.

In contrast with the ISS kits, which used only negative emotion as the intermediary, the Metatron-Haruyuki network allowed the transmission of every kind of data. Not only thoughts and feelings, but also the power to fight...And even life itself.

In the pure-white light, Haruyuki heard it.

"Now, let us return to the Mean Level. It is time to fight our enemy."

B-but...

"It's all right. Stand and face it unafraid. Silver Crow...I am with you."

Okay. Thanks, Metatron. I'll fight. For my friends. For myself. And for you.

Time started to flow once more.



Graaang! A roaring pressure wave hit Haruyuki from all directions. Color was returning to the world: the twilight sky spreading out without edge; the white buildings of the town below, crimson and violet; the shadow of the crater gouged out of the earth; the crimson avatar he held tightly in his arms.

And the ink-black lance charging from below to swallow the two up.

He didn't even have the time to think about the lance, much less dodge it. Haruyuki pulled Niko tightly to him with one hand as he stretched the other out, five fingers splayed.

And then the mass of nihilistic energy reached Silver Crow's right hand. If this had been before the shift to the Highest Level, Haruyuki and Niko would have been instantly vaporized. But just as the dark laser was on the verge of touching his palm, it stopped, sparks like lightning shooting off in every direction. It swelled up into a massive sphere and then flipped around. It shrank to a diameter of a mere thirty centimeters, but the energy it contained was not diminished. The incredibly dense ball of nothingness warped the surrounding sky and made his avatar's armor squeal.

It's going to explode!

Clutching the still-unconscious Niko to his chest, Haruyuki gritted his teeth. The fact that he was able to stop the laser with one hand was probably because the strength of his armor had been boosted up to the same level as Metatron's main body. But the nihilistic attack of Mark II's main armaments brought about a massive explosion when it made a direct hit and annihilated everything within the effective range—a diameter of 150 meters across. No matter how much stronger his armor was now, his health gauge had been cut down to a mere 5 percent. He highly doubted this would take him through to the other side of an explosion with enough energy to instantly erase the indestructible school building.

But then.

It's all right. I will protect you.

An imposing, powerful voice echoed in his mind, just like the first time he'd had contact with Metatron.

Instantly, his health gauge was completely recovered, all the way to the right edge. And more than that: Six additional gauges appeared below it. If this was the number of gauges of Metatron's second form, then she had an overwhelming endurance, surpassing even that of the five bars of Suzaku.

When Haruyuki shifted to hold Scarlet Rain more securely, the wings on his back—all three sets—wrapped tightly around them both. And then the negative Incarnate energy—collapsed to the extreme, a black hole—exploded at zero range.

All light and sound was lost. But the darkness that swallowed Haruyuki was the polar opposite of the silence of the Highest Level—a muddled hatred. This will itself, trying to destroy anything and everything, turned into a torrent of particles to assault his avatar. Tossed about like a small bird in a raging storm, Haruyuki desperately kept his body curled up and tried to protect both Niko and himself. The armor he'd gained from Metatron's divine protection just barely withstood the raging dark energy, but it could not prevent the nihilistic damage permeating deep down to the naked body of the avatar inside. The seven-tiered health gauge began to drop with relentless ferocity.

At the same time, Haruyuki was assaulted by a fierce pain, like he was being pierced by hundreds of needles of ice, and he gritted his teeth as hard as he could. He earnestly suppressed the cries that rose up in his throat; after all, Metatron was probably feeling the same pain. Even if she was an Enemy of the highest order, praised as one of the Four Saints, at a glance, she was a serene lady, and if Metatron could withstand this, then Haruyuki couldn't exactly sit here screaming.

In seconds, the seventh tier of his health gauge was drained, quickly followed by the sixth and the fifth. The force started to slow with the fourth tier, and then finally stopped at nearly carving away the third. The pain radiating through him gradually weakened and eventually faded away entirely. It seemed that Niko, in his arms, was also somehow safe.

In the steadily fading darkness, Haruyuki let out the breath he'd been holding in a long sigh. "That was close...I can't believe it took five tiers of the gauge..."

"If I were the one fighting," the Archangel's voice replied immediately in his mind, *"I wouldn't have taken a direct hit to start with."*

"I—I guess not. But now that we've made it through the laser, we're good. He can't fire again for another sixty seconds, so we'll

settle this before—”

“*Ascend!!*” Metatron’s sharp voice shouted.

Reflexively, Haruyuki tried to shoot upward. But unfortunately, all his wings were wrapped around his body to protect Niko. He started to move a breath too late.

An enormous shadow plunged through the scattering darkness and appeared directly above him to charge at him with terrifying speed. The Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. But they were five hundred meters off the ground.

It flew?! How?! It doesn’t have the power of flight!! Haruyuki’s shock turned to fear the instant he saw the inky flames gushing from the back of the massive body.

The basis for Mark II was the four Enhanced Armaments he’d stolen from the Red King. The center was the cockpit. Arms equipped with laser guns. Legs to support the super-massive weight. And the thruster blocks on its back.

Just as her nickname, Immobile Fortress, indicated, Niko stubbornly refused to move while Invincible was deployed. But it wasn’t that she *couldn’t* move. She didn’t have the same mobility as in Dreadnought mode, but if she went full throttle with her thrusters in Invincible mode, she could make the enormous steel bulk charge for a short time.

Mark II should have dropped back to the earth after Haruyuki’s Light Speed pulled it up into the heavens, but now it was clear that it had boosted the propulsive force of the thrusters with Incarnate energy and flown. Was this another technique it had developed on the fly?

Finally spreading his wings, Haruyuki tried to thrust away the incoming giant, but he was slow to gain speed. Although he’d had no choice, because he’d used his wings as armor, they had been minutely scratched by particles of darkness.

Directly below, Mark II’s massive arm drew near. Was it trying to grab him again? But its talons were clenched shut. If it was just a simple punch, then it couldn’t break Haruyuki’s armor the way he was now. Take it with his feet and use the reaction to ascend—

Zwanning! The heavy vibration echoed through the air, and a jet-black aura cloaked the steely fist. The other ISS kit Incarnate technique, Dark Blow. Its power would far surpass even the earlier Dark Shot.

“*No! Evade!!*” Metatron shouted.

“Nngh.....!!”

Haruyuki flapped his injured wings with every ounce of strength he had. But the massive ball of darkness emitted a powerful gravity and tried to pull him back toward it. If he took a direct hit, he would

inevitably be knocked out of existence, under the divine protection of an Archangel or not.

Beyond the shutter protecting Mark II's lone eye, a light shone reddish-black, mixed with every possible negative emotion. Haruyuki heard a faint moaning.

Deelooroo...Rip. Crush. Erase. Smash. Break. Break. Break-break-break-break-break-break.

A moaning that sounded like a curse.

I will not allow it. A bracing voice cut through the unearthly chant. Silver Crow is my companion of a thousand years. I will not allow such an abominable power to break him!

Haruyuki turned his palm toward the inky vortex charging him and unconsciously added his own voice to Metatron's powerful cry.

““Trisagion!!””

The six wings on his back caught the eternal twilight and flashed brilliantly as a pure-white beam gushed from his palm.

Darkness and light collided, and the color disappeared from the world once more. Above the border where the two opposing affinity energies fought against each other: white. Below: black. In this world of extreme monochrome, Haruyuki felt one thing very keenly.

Metatron was converting her very existence into energy. As proof of this, even though Haruyuki himself was not taking any damage, the remaining two tiers of his health gauge were dropping before his eyes. She had to do this to produce a light powerful enough to counteract Mark II's Dark Blow.

After Metatron had been moved from her dungeon, her superpowerful laser attack, Trisagion, had turned Midtown Tower into an impenetrable fortress. The source of that energy was the light of the sun absorbed through her wings. But in contrast with the wings of Metatron's first form, a massive body that covered the sky, the Metatron Wings on Haruyuki's back had been shrunk to match his avatar's size. Metatron was supplying the missing energy by transforming her own self into light.

No, Metatron! You'll disappear!! Haruyuki prayed, lost to himself. But the laser emitted from his right hand actually grew brighter. The border between light and dark was steadily pushed downward.

But abruptly, he heard a calm voice in his mind.

“This is acceptable. The time since I encountered you at that tower where I

was bound has been so fruitful as to be incomparable with the rest of my eight thousand years of life.

“I have spoken with you at length; seen much; learned much. And I realized something very precious. Or perhaps something more important than the reason this world exists.”

Metatron's voice was fading bit by bit into transparency.

“What did you realize?” Haruyuki asked, desperately trying to maintain their connection.

“Given who you are, perhaps you realized this long ago,” the voice replied lightly with a hint of laughter. *“It's...the fact that you little warriors and we Beings are exactly the same in nature. Only the vessel differs...We are souls who think the same way, suffer the same way, and seek the same way.”*

Metatron's answer brought a sudden surge of tears to his eyes. In his blurred field of view, his health gauge continued to drop relentlessly. The last tier was cut in half, into the yellow. Finally, red. When it returned to Haruyuki's original 5 percent, Metatron would disappear.

“That's...,” Haruyuki murmured as particles of light touched the bare cheeks of his avatar beneath his cracked goggles. *Well, of course we are. I mean, you and me, we met, we talked, we made a promise...We said we'd see the end of the world together. We'd break into the Castle together, charge the Shrine of the Eight Divines, and touch The Fluctuating Light.*

So...you can't. You can't disappear now. You can't say such weak stuff. It's no big deal for me to die once at least in this world. I can just come back to life after sixty minutes. So...So...

The remainder in his health gauge dropped from 20 percent to 10. Almost like a ribbon unraveling, the connection with Metatron was slipping away. The warmth that had been right beside his heart ever since he'd been given the Metatron Wings receded.

Then, a faint voice came to him from the distance.

“This is enough. If it is to strike a blow against your enemy...and the enemy of this world, then I regret nothing.”

“But...But we promised, didn't we?!” he pleaded. *“Together, we'd... Together...”*

"My servant...must not cry.

"I know you will reach it someday.

"The end of this Accelerated World we live in...

"This...Accel World."

The depletion of his gauge stopped with 5 percent remaining. At the same time, the light of Trisagion flashed powerfully bright and shot through the border with the darkness.

"Unh...Aah...Aaaaaaaaah!!" Haruyuki cried out, overwhelmed by loss, now that his bond with Metatron was completely severed.

The laser rapidly weakened, and the light and darkness broke up into pieces and disappeared. From the other side of that boundary, he saw Mark II, its right arm snapped off. Still clutching Niko to him, Haruyuki clenched his right hand into a fist, and a silver light welled up in it. Six wings roared from his back.

Badly injured, Mark II started to drop to earth, now that its thrusters had cut out, and Haruyuki chased after it.

"Deel...roo-rooo-aah!!" With an angry howl, Mark II reached out its remaining hand. Perhaps intending to grab hold of him again, the sinister claws strained, wide open.

But Haruyuki accelerated harder and slammed his fist directly into the center of the massive hand. The three talons were ripped off from the base, and the remaining wrist area jetted black flames and exploded.

Not yet. Fasterrrrrrr!

"Unnh...Aaaaaaaaah!!" Adding his own roar to the mix, Haruyuki became a dazzling-white shooting star and plunged into the giant's head. His fist struck the shutter armor protecting the single eye. Cracks radiated outward in the six armored flaps, but they failed to shatter and managed to repel his fist.

"Roo-roo-roo-dee-aaaaaah!!" Mark II fell to the ground four hundred meters below, taking Haruyuki along for the ride as it brandished its left arm with a battle cry full of hatred. It might have been missing everything past the wrist, but if that trunk of an arm made direct contact with Haruyuki, his health gauge and its remaining 5 percent would be knocked out of existence.

He'd concentrated all his energy in his fist and his wings; he could no longer evade or defend. His sole thought to punch all the way through, he flew in earnest. The armor of the lone eye stubbornly endured, even as the fissures across it doubled, then tripled. From above, the giant cudgel of an arm thundered downward.

"I won't...let you!" Niko shouted, still in Haruyuki's arm.

Having apparently regained consciousness at some point, the small crimson avatar leapt out and slammed her battered and beaten

body into Mark II's left arm. Shedding chunks of armor, she fired one gunshot after another into the damaged landscape of the wrist where the talons had been. A series of small explosions went off inside the arm, and it stopped moving.

"I'll hold back the arm!" Niko looked back, her eye lenses shining with a powerful light. "Crow! You...finish this!!"

".....!!"

Haruyuki clenched his hand tightly, as hard as he could.

Metatron had burned up her very essence when she activated Trisagion. Niko was risking her tiny, beaten body to protect him. Pard had launched a suicide attack with Bloodshed Cannon to rescue him and Niko when they were captive in Mark II's hands. And Takumu and Chiyuri were waiting on the ground, trusting in Haruyuki's victory. Fuko, Utai, Akira, and Kuroyukihime were also working hard at that moment, racing to this battleground.

And it wasn't just his comrades. Ash Roller/Rin Kusakabe—enduring the suffering brought about by the ISS kit in the nurse's office in the real world. Magenta Scissor and Avocado Avoider, who'd had Haruyuki's back in the battle with Metatron's first form. Chocolat Puppeteer of the Legion Petit Paquet, who'd fought Magenta's troops with him. Trilead Tetroxide, who had helped him escape from the Castle. Chrome Falcon and Saffron Blossom—and the Beast—who shared with him the sadness produced by the Armor of Catastrophe.

The many Burst Linkers who had crossed fists with Haruyuki up to that point. Reina Izeki from the Animal Care Club, who wasn't a Burst Linker, but who nonetheless taught him a good many things about mirrors. The northern white-faced owl, Hoo, who gave him the courage to fly. And his destined rival, Wolfram Cerberus, imprisoned in the massive armor before his eyes. These connections with many—so very many—people had guided Haruyuki and given him strength.

The red light that had transformed Niko's Enhanced Armament and wiped out Cerberus III/Dusk Taker's self was probably the negative Incarnate energy accumulated in the ISS kit main body. The energy alone had been sent from the main body hidden away in Midtown Tower to the Acceleration Research Society headquarters and was now lodged in the armor. Which meant that the single eye before Haruyuki—the fiercely flashing reddish-black light in the darkness inside—was a mass of Incarnate extracted from all those who had been parasitized by the ISS kit. It was only natural, then, that Mark II's Dark Shot and Dark Blow had such incredible power. They used the anger and hatred, the utter despair, of dozens of people as their energy source.

But. What power do my fists, my wings contain now?

"More than yours, tens of times...hundreds, thousands of times!"

Jets of silver aura gushed from his fist to envelop his body and turn him into a pillar of flames from his six wings. “Strong...gerrrrrrrrrr!!”

The shutter armor protecting the lone eye of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, shattered into pieces.

The instant Haruyuki’s fist plunged into the inky hole, a concentric shock wave spread out, rippling in all directions. A pillar of white light soared up in the center, connecting heaven and earth.

Having completely smashed Mark II’s head, Haruyuki continued to chase the giant, now motionless and still falling, and plunged toward the earth at an incredible speed. He no longer had the extra power to decelerate, much less land. If he made another crater in the center of the initial crater, his health gauge would be totally emptied at the same time, and he’d die—a calculation he made in less than a millisecond.

But when he was at fifty meters above the ground, the Metatron Wings on his back automatically generated a reverse thrust. Still, his speed didn’t really drop, but now that Haruyuki had recovered a bit of his strength and had a little room to breathe, he worked hard to shift his body while using his original metal wings to decelerate. He just barely succeeded in landing on both feet.



Unable to entirely absorb the impact, his health gauge was carved away another percent or so. But he was still alive. Almost as if to confirm his survival, the four upper wings vibrated slightly. But when he looked over his shoulder, he was back to his original pair of wings. The other four had soundlessly turned to light and scattered.

In the left of his vision, a system message modestly scrolled by, informing him that the Enhanced Armament, Metatron Wings, had been unequipped. The wings had also left Haruyuki, now that their original owner was gone. A sharp, sad pain pierced his chest, and he fought the urge to sink to his knees.

But he still had work to do.

“Niko!” Haruyuki called hoarsely, looking to the sky.

He first saw the massive body of Mark II falling to the ground, arms and legs limp. Its head was completely gone, and black noxious gas seeped from the cracks in its shattered armor like oily smoke. Its right arm had been destroyed by Trisagion and was missing from the shoulder, but the majority of its left arm was still in good shape, and Haruyuki spotted a red light of reflection at its end.

“Niko!” he yelled. “You have to jump!!”

Fortunately, his voice seemed to reach her; the crimson light pulled away from the giant’s bulk. Haruyuki turned toward the southern side of the crater where the little avatar would land and ran frantically on weak legs. Given that Niko’s health gauge may or may not have had 10 percent left in it, even if she managed to avoid getting dragged into Mark II’s plunge into the earth, she’d die if she fell from that height.

He didn’t have the strength to fly anymore, so he was staggering forward on foot when a shadow overtook him. A deep-red, leopard-type avatar—Blood Leopard. She, too, was severely injured after her special attack, Bloodshed Cannon, but when she reached the point of Niko’s descent a few seconds before Haruyuki, she jumped up and caught the red avatar on her back.

She very nearly fell over when she landed, and Haruyuki, finally reaching her side, held her up with one hand. He caught Niko with the other and sank to his knees with a *clank*.

“...Thanks, Pard...Ya did it, Crow. ’Mazing...Sendin’ that sucker flyin’...”

He heard a murmur in his ear, and Haruyuki managed a pained smile. “It’s ’cause you saved me, Niko. Thanks.”

An enormous sense of loss still ruled his heart. Archangel Metatron had given Haruyuki wings, become an icon and guided him through enemy territory, shown him to the Highest Level and given him a glimpse of the true form of the Accelerated World, and in the

end, had transformed her very essence into light to strike down an enormously powerful enemy. And now she was gone. He couldn't actually believe it. His tears threatened to spill out once more, but he gritted his teeth beneath his cracked mirrored goggles and held them back. He wasn't allowed to cry just yet. Still holding Niko, he staggered to his feet and looked back.

The massive bulk of Mark II was just about to hit the ground. The reddish-black iron giant crashed back-first into the center of the crater it had made, and floods of miasmic vapors jetted from its joints and the openings where its head and left arm had been.

Haruyuki assumed the dull black smoke was Incarnate energy rendered visible, but the true nature of the "darkness" that lived in Mark II remained inside the massive body. Similarly to Mark I's Beast, something was possessing the Enhanced Armament itself, system-wise; so as long as the armor existed, the darkness would also linger. There was only one way to make it disappear.

"Haruuuuuu!!!"

Incredibly, he heard a voice shouting from behind...followed by the sound of two pairs of feet. Turning once more, he saw Lime Bell and Cyan Pile running toward them from the crater's southern edge. He waved to signal them and responded with what voice he could muster. "Chiyu! Taku! Over here!"

Chiyuri waved back, and a few seconds later, she was standing next to Haruyuki and the others. She sighed heavily. "Sorry we're late. We had a hard time finding any buildings I could break..."

"It's okay. The fight...just ended," he replied reassuringly, barely able to keep the tremors from his voice. He turned back to the center of the crater.

The five stared silently for a time at the giant in its death throes. The gas seemed to be nearly exhausted; only a thin trail of smoke rose from the head area. Somehow, the armor seemed smaller now. The limbs were wriggling helplessly, but even this movement gradually grew sluggish.

"If you would, Chiyu," Haruyuki said.

The Watch Witch, Lime Bell, nodded deeply and took a few steps forward. She brandished the Choir Chime of her left arm. When she waved it in two large counterclockwise circles, something that sounded reminiscent of the chime of a school bell filled the crater.

"Citron Caaaaallllll!!!" She brought down the large bell, and a yellow-green light spilled out and enveloped the giant on the ground.

The last time, Mark II had changed into Dreadnought mode and shaken off Citron Call with its mobility. But it looked like it no longer had the power now to stand up, much less transform. Even when the light hit it, it only twisted slightly, not enough to escape.

Seven seconds, eight, nine...Ten seconds.

The light blanketing Mark II grew dazzlingly bright. The arms and the nihilistic lasers that had so tortured Haruyuki and his friends—or to be precise, the forearm of the remaining left arm—melted into an infinity of glittering lights and vanished.

At the same time, a light of the same color wrapped around Niko, still in Haruyuki's arms. Citron Call's power to go back in time had returned the main armament of Invincible to its original owner. And ten seconds after that, Mark II's legs vanished. All that remained were the streamlined cockpit and the thruster block on its back.

With her right hand on the large bell of her left and her thin legs firmly braced, Lime Bell continued to make the fresh green light flow. Looking at the small, reliable back of his childhood friend, Haruyuki had a sudden thought in the bottom of his heart. Would they be able to rewind the extinction of Metatron with Citron Call? In a certain sense, Metatron had possessed Haruyuki, so if they rewound Haruyuki's status, then maybe...

Mark II's massive body flashed brightly a third time, and the torso that made him think of a type of shelled creature disappeared. The cockpit block had returned to Niko. And then there was a sharp metallic sound. *Kashak!*

Haruyuki gasped, his eyes still on the center of the crater. There was a slender avatar with gray metal armor lying on the ground. Wolfram Cerberus. A duel genius, toyed with by an unfortunate fate. Haruyuki's rival and dear friend.

There was no doubt that the sharply edged design and the extremely hard armor texture were Cerberus, but four protrusions almost like wings stretched out from his back. The thruster block for high-speed movement, the last Enhanced Armament that Cerberus III/the Nomi copy had taken from Niko, had shrunk to match the size of Cerberus's body.

The light of Citron Call continued to firmly hold Cerberus. In another few seconds, the thruster would also be returned to Niko, and the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, would be completely eliminated. Haruyuki—and probably the other four, too—believed this. But none could have predicted what happened next.

Still unconscious on the ground, Wolfram Cerberus abruptly vanished, almost as though he'd been an immaterial projection.

"What?!" Chiyuri cried out, whirling her head around.

Haruyuki also looked around the crater, dumbfounded, but there was no sign of Cerberus anywhere.

He'd been lying prone on the ground. It was absolutely impossible for him to have run away so quickly that the five of them hadn't seen him. Haruyuki could only assume he'd vanished from the field without

warning.

Having lost its target, the light of Citron Call quickly weakened, and as it faded completely, Niko, still in Haruyuki's arms, clicked her tongue.

"Tch! Is that it? They got us!!"

"Huh? Got us? What?" he asked hurriedly in response.

"Them..." The Red King clenched her injured hand ruefully. "They cut off Wolfram Cerberus's connection from the real world. The way he disappeared, that's the only thing possible."

"O-of course!" Takumu groaned. "I *thought* Black Vise and Argon Array were a little too happy to walk away...I never dreamed they'd use a trick like this."

"Nngh." Staring at the fissure in the center of the crater, Haruyuki clenched his teeth in simultaneous shock and understanding. He'd thought from the way Argon Array talked that she might be able to interfere with Cerberus in the real, too. But not that she would activate a forced disconnect without the least hesitation. And he was sure it hadn't been to help Cerberus.

Here, his surprise finally changed to worry, and he hurried to ask Takumu, "S-so then, Taku, what about the last piece of Niko's Enhanced Armament?!"

It wasn't Takumu who answered him, but Niko herself. "If he's vanished from the Unlimited Neutral Field, there's nothing we can do about it. Guess I'll just have to leave the thruster with him for the time being."

"B-but—!"

"No way around it. Let's just be glad we got the cockpit, main armament, and legs back. And he didn't get the missile pods to start with."

"B-but..." She was so clear and certain, though, that he couldn't really say anything more than that.

Jumping down from his arms, the Red King took a few steps and put a hand on Pard's back. The leopard avatar was also glaring regretfully at the center of the crater, but as a veteran Linker, she likely understood that they really could do nothing about it now.

Grrrrr. She responded to the contact with a low growl and turned toward Haruyuki and the others.

Blood Leopard, one of the Red Legion's Triplex, and Prominence's leader, Scarlet Rain, both dipped their heads deeply at the same time. When they finally straightened up again, Niko looked at each of them in turn. "Silver Crow. Cyan Pile. And Lime Bell. Because of my cowardice, I put you in a seriously bad sitch."

"What?!" Chiyuri cried, waving a hand in front of her face. "Don't be so cold, Niko! We're friends, aren't we?! It's only natural we help

out when one of us is in trouble!”

“That’s right, Red King,” Takumu continued. “The two of you have helped us out any number of times before, after all.”

Of course, Haruyuki tried to say something as well, but Chiyuri stole his turn from him. “And I’m sorry, too. I couldn’t get all your Enhanced Armaments back...If I’d built up my special-attack gauge a minute—no, thirty seconds faster, I could’ve gotten back the last one before they pulled Cerberus’s cable...”

“Now, *that’s* cold, Bell. No, oh, um...” Suddenly tongue-tied, Niko scratched the damaged antenna parts on her head. “So, like, what should I call you? Not your avatar name, but somethin’ from your real name.”

After a moment of surprise, Chiyuri pulled at the brim of her triangle hat as if embarrassed. “Oh, that doesn’t really matter. Kuroyukihime calls me Chiyuri, and Sister Fuko calls me Chiiko...”

“Th-that so? ’Kay, I’ll think about it. Anyway, thanks. Seriously.” Niko offered her thanks once more.

Takumu cleared his throat. “Red King, I also don’t mind whatever you’d prefer to call me.”

“I already got a great one for you, Professor.”

“...C-certainly. That’s that, then.”

Chiyuri started to laugh out loud at this, and the air in the place eased up the slightest bit.

Haruyuki also let his shoulders relax and looked down at the bottom of the crater once more. Wolfram Cerberus had left the Unlimited Neutral Field through a forced disconnection, still equipped with the last of the parts that made up Invincible. Which meant that although the majority of the Incarnate energy accumulated in the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, had dissipated into the air, it would still continue to exist as an item in Cerberus’s storage.

Had the darkness already disappeared from the thruster block, just as Mark I, aka the Disaster, had been purified and returned to the Destiny? Or was the evil transferred from the ISS kit main body still lurking, weakened, in the Enhanced Armament? He had no way of knowing that right now.

Cerberus. And Niko. I promise. I’ll completely eliminate Mark II and return the final part to where it belongs. Absolutely.

At almost the same time as Haruyuki made this vow in his heart, a cry slipped from Takumu’s mouth. “Ah!” Under the collected gazes of his comrades, the large blue avatar took a step toward Niko. “Th-that reminds me. It’s not just Cerberus. The Red King should also be disconnecting soon.”

“Me? Why?” Niko sounded baffled, but Chiyuri and Pard exchanged looks that said, *Now that you mention it...*

“Because Master, Raker, and the others were returning to the real world through the portal at Midtown Tower to pull out the Red King’s cable. On Haru’s instruction.”

“Th-that’s okay now,” Haruyuki hurried to interject. “I think. Kuroyukihime and them are on their way from Midtown. They must have seen Mark II’s attack and decided to come here.”

“How do you know that, Haru?” It was only natural for Chiyuri to ask the question, but he couldn’t answer it so simply. Because he’d seen Kuroyukihime’s team moving when he was looking out over the entire Accelerated World after Metatron brought him to the Highest Level. The only one who could explain properly was Metatron, but she would never tell the story again. Pushing back the painful sensation that welled up in his throat once more, Haruyuki said, “I’ll explain later. At any rate, they should be here soon. They’re coming from that direction.” He indicated the northern edge of the crater, and everyone turned their eyes in that direction.

At basically the same time, a black silhouette rose over the edge carved smoothly out of the ground. One, two, three, four...five, six, seven...Staring dumbfounded at the shadows that continued to grow in number and surround the crater, Haruyuki remembered that he’d seen something similar once before.

It had been five months earlier when they were headed to the Ikebukuro Area in the Unlimited Neutral Field with Niko, who had asked them to help catch the fifth Chrome Disaster, aka Cherry Rook. Crypt Cosmic Circus, led by the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, had ambushed them and put Haruyuki and his friends into serious danger.

It can’t be... He swallowed hard and then suddenly noticed that not only were nearly all the silhouettes shaped differently from duel avatars, but some among them were rather large for avatars. In other words, they were...

“No way. Are those all Enemies?” Chiyuri murmured, and belatedly, Haruyuki remembered.

It hadn’t been just Kuroyukihime and the others heading for this crater. Enemies of varying sizes were converging from all directions, drawn in by the “sound” of the Incarnate techniques. They were mainly Lesser class with only two or three larger Wild class, but there were far too many to be able to fight all at once.

“Aah, well. Only natural given how everyone was using Incarnate left and right,” Niko commented.

“NP.” Pard, now back to human form, spoke for the first time in a while. “Crow will fly us all out of here.”

“L-leave it to me!”

Wait, what? I mean, Metatron Wings...They don’t exist anymore. Each time he remembered his parting with the Archangel, loneliness

made his heart heavy, but this was not the time for sniffing.

Even though he hadn't even been equipped with the Metatron Wings for a full hour, his back felt so much lighter without them. He put his strength into it and spread his two silver wings. He should at least be able to get four people out of the crater with his own flight ability.

"Everyone! Grab on!" Haruyuki cried, spreading his arms, and just like when they had dodged Mark II's laser, Pard and Niko leapt onto his left arm while Takumu and Chiyuri grabbed his right. He revved his wings with enough force to use up the last of his special-attack gauge, and— "Nngh!"

Too heavy.

No, it wasn't because of his burden. He wasn't getting any lift with his wings. In addition to the damage the silver fins had taken in the many fierce battles, his mental exhaustion also dulled his flying ability. It wasn't quite the Incarnate System, but Silver Crow's flight ability mainly used imagination circuits for its control, so for better or for worse, his mental level affected it at the extremes. Even so, he managed somehow to ascend about ten meters, but there were more than a few Enemies with long-distance attack abilities. They would need to fly three times that high to safely escape the crater.

"Unh...Aaah!" Howling, he sincerely tried to get some thrust in his wings. But he merely used up his special-attack gauge; he couldn't get more altitude.

And perhaps the unstable high frequencies his wings were emitting stimulated the Enemies; over twenty of various sizes surrounding the crater began to run, letting out curious cries.

"Y-you okay, Haru?" Takumu asked uneasily.

"You can do it, Haru!" Chiyuri cheered.

Normally, the encouragement of his two childhood friends gave him more energy than anything else, but right now, the gaping hole in his heart sucked all the vitality out of it. Belatedly, he realized the reason he couldn't fly wasn't only the damage to his wings and his mental exhaustion. It was no good. He couldn't fly anymore. At least, not until he could be by himself and cry out loud.

"...Guys, I'm sorry..." Apologizing weakly, he helplessly dropped back down.

And then, a crimson light poured down from the sky. Countless fiery beams shot down to surround Haruyuki and his friends, and they had no sooner landed inside the crater than pillars of pure-red flames were jetting upward.

Outflanked by the flames, the Enemies lost sight of their prey and moved about in confusion, howling.

His surprise made him forget his defeat for the moment, at least,

and as he continued to just barely hover, he turned his head back up toward the sky and saw a pale-blue light flickering and flying across the evening sky dyed its madder-red.

“Strato-Shooter,” Pard murmured, hanging on to Haruyuki’s left side. There was no mistaking it. That light was the jet of Sky Raker’s Enhanced Armament, Gale Thruster.

As the five stared upward, the shooting star abruptly split into two. The newly born light was a deeper red than the twilight. Falling in a straight line toward Haruyuki and the others, the light soon revealed the form of a duel avatar. Armor patterned after *hakama* trousers and a white robe. Adornments resembling long hair. A large bow in the right hand.

Testarossa Ardor Maiden drew her longbow Flame Caller as she fell and shouted the name of the technique loud enough for Haruyuki and the others to hear. “Flame Vortex!”

This time, a single flaming arrow was released. But this instantly grew enormous—into a lance of whirling flames—and plunged down right in front of the Wild-class Enemies about to recommence their charge from the southern side.

Of course, it was no match for Mark II’s nihilistic laser, which had created the crater itself, but even so, it brought about a massive explosion like an air-to-ground missile, and at the same time as it pushed Haruyuki and the others to the north side, it knocked the massive Wild-class bodies back.

Ardor Maiden used the blast she had produced to kill the force of her descent and land gently in the bottom of the crater. She looked up at Haruyuki and the others seven meters in the air and shouted, “C! Please escape that way!” The small hand gestured toward the northern edge of the crater. But there, too, five or six Enemies, including a scorpion-shaped Wild-class, had leapt over the initial flames to approach them. The scorpion’s tail was brandished high, and even if they got moving, it didn’t look like they’d be able to escape its sinister stinger.

But the instant Haruyuki heard Maiden’s instruction, his wilting vitality was stirred, and he flew to the north. Even if he couldn’t ascend, he might be able to manage a horizontal half glide—now that Utai and Fuko had come to help them.

Holding Takumu tightly on his right and Pard on his left, he charged forward with all the speed he could muster. Ardor Maiden raced along on the ground beneath them with nimble steps befitting her form.

The scorpion Enemy ahead of them sensed the approach of its prey and boldly readied its large tail and claws. Utai drew her bow and launched a series of flame arrows. True to their aim, they plunged

into the scorpion's body and enveloped the Enemy in flames, but it didn't stop moving.

"Crap. That thing's shell is fire resistant," Niko groaned, reaching out for the handgun on her hip. But before she could draw it, a flood of water poured down from behind the scorpion, hit the red-hot carapace, and instantly evaporated.

The white steam that puffed up blinded the scorpion and the small Enemies around it. Maiden didn't hesitate to plunge into the steam, and Haruyuki flew in earnest to take advantage of this chance to slip above the scorpion. Body swinging from side to side, he tried nevertheless to somehow get through the circle of Enemies.

The scorpion's tail rose furiously, piercing the white steam directly below. Perhaps the tail itself had a homing function; the darkly glistening stinger closed in unerringly on Haruyuki's chest. He couldn't avoid it or defend against it. He'd be beaten down. No, his health gauge would be emptied.

And then, beneath the steam, a crimson-red light flashed brightly. At the same time, a clear and powerful call to pierce the depths of his heart:

"Death By Embracing!!"

The scorpion Enemy's tail was cut off at the base, and the stinger shattered fleetingly as though made of glass before it could plunge into Haruyuki's chest. The Wild-class Enemy let out a high-pitched shriek before pulling in the Lesser-class Enemies around it and causing collateral damage.

As he cut through the countless fragments dancing through the air to keep moving forward, Haruyuki strained his eyes to look directly down. He saw Ardor Maiden nimbly dodging the scorpion's legs as she advanced—and running alongside her, a jet-black avatar. The Black King, World End, Black Lotus.

In which case, the water that had come pouring down to produce the steamy smoke screen had been launched by The One, Aqua Current. The four Legion members they'd left behind at Midtown Tower had probably fought the ISS kit main body, crushed it, and without taking even the briefest of breaks, had advanced on the ruins of this school. All to save Haruyuki and the others.

As Kuroyukihime ran seven meters below him, he saw that the sword tips of all her limbs had been smashed, and her armor was covered in damage. Utai, Fuko flying far up in the sky above, and Akira, waiting on the edge of the crater, were no doubt also ferociously exhausted.

"Kuroyukihime...Master...Mei...Curren...!" By calling their

names, he stirred up a power in him on the verge of being exhausted. Following a gentle diagonal, Haruyuki earnestly ascended, and his friends called out to him from either side.

“Just a little farther, Haru!”

“Haru, you can do it!”

“Crow, I know you can fly!”

“WTG, Crow!”

Their cheers were drowned out by the shaking of the earth. The group of Enemies were regrouping from the damage and chaos and chasing after them. Another thirty meters until they were out of the crater...Twenty...

“Unh. Ah! Aaaah!” With a cry, he dug up the last of his strength and flew the remaining distance.

The instant he passed the sharp edge of the earth, like a knife had gouged its insides out, and found himself above the wide road, his special-attack gauge and his mental energy depleted at the same time. Even his field of view grew dim, and without the leeway to take on a landing posture, Haruyuki leaned forward and fell. But as he was on the verge of plunging into the ground face-first, powerful arms pulled him back from either side. Takumu and Pard had hit the ground with their own feet and propped Haruyuki up.

“GJ.” Pard was supposedly glued to him, but her voice sounded far away for some reason.

His body was heavy, like he had no strength in his limbs. But this wasn’t the time to collapse. More than twenty Enemies were also quickly climbing the slope of the crater. They had to get as much distance as they could now, while they were temporarily out of the Enemies’ sight.

Haruyuki desperately tried to stand up, when a hard, sharp, and somehow gentle hand patted his shoulder.

“You did well, Silver Crow.”

“...Kuro...yuki...,” he said hoarsely, managing to turn his face to see a hazy, jet-black avatar with broken arms stretched out before him.

Takumu and Pard held Haruyuki up while Kuroyukihime stepped forward and hugged him to her tenderly. “Leave the rest to us. Rest. You fought your battle magnificently.”

“But. From behind. Enemies...”

“Don’t worry. I couldn’t help you in your most trying time. Let me open a path of retreat at the very least,” she insisted.

“Thanks to how hard you fought, C, we still have plenty of energy!” Utai agreed, having climbed the slope with their king.

“We’ll take care of everything else.” Akira had also appeared from somewhere.

Finally, Fuko danced down from the sky with a light propulsive sound to finish up. “Corvus, you sit back and rest now.”

The shaking of the earth caused by the charging Enemies would be upon them soon enough. Kuroyukihime left Haruyuki to Takumu and whirled around with a sharp *tak* to stand on the edge of the crater. Utai, Akira, and Fuko stepped forward to either side of her. The four were just as injured as Haruyuki and his team, or even more so. To the point where Fuko switched from Gale Thruster to her wheelchair; both her legs were gone from the knee down. But there was not a hint of fear or cowardice in the Black King and the Four Elements.

“Honestly, just can’t be beat,” Niko murmured very close to him.

Right, they really can’t be beat, Haruyuki agreed in his heart.

All they could do was fight. Kuroyukihime and the others would never give up on this Burst Linker basic, this deepest secret and condition. As long as there were enemies standing in their way, as long as they had hands they could clench into fists, as long as they existed, they would fight.

They would keep fighting.

But that’s me, too. There’s still an enemy I need to fight. The Acceleration Research Society. They ran off with the last of Niko’s Enhanced Armament; they still have Wolfram Cerberus. And the Society leader who not only uses so many Enemies, but also toys with the memories of Burst Linkers who’ve lost all their points.

It’s all I can do right now to stay on my feet, but I’m going to keep fighting them. And then someday, I’ll break through the Castle gate, attack the Shrine of the Eight Divines, and reach the last Arc. To learn about the end of the world that Kuroyukihime—and Metatron—have sought.

With the injured scorpion in the lead, the rampaging Enemies crested the crater edge and danced forward.

A fierce light jetted from Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Utai, and Akira. Their massive, joint technique knocked the Enemy group flying. Howling, the various forms tumbled back into the crater and kicked and struggled for a few seconds, but even after they got back to their feet, they seemed to have lost their fight; they didn’t move.

Kuroyukihime whirled around and announced crisply, “Today’s battle appears to have ended here. The closest portal is in the Metropolitan Central Library a kilometer ahead. Now...”

She turned the sword of her right hand due north.

“Let’s go home. To the real world.”

The total time in the Unlimited Neutral Field for the missions to rescue Aqua Current and destroy the ISS kit main body, along with the surprise mission to get the Red King back and destroy the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, was approximately twelve hours and thirty minutes. In other words, when Haruyuki slowly opened his eyes after returning to the Umesato student council office in the real world, the analog clock hanging on the wall in front of him had only advanced fifty seconds from 12:20:10, when the mission had started. Considering that they had reaccelerated after the mission to rescue Current, this was a fairly high-speed clear.

He'd had dives this long in the Unlimited Neutral Field before, but he'd never really felt the density of this flow of time, sped up a thousand times, like he did now. He'd been accelerated, true, but it felt like several days had passed in the real world.

When he took his eyes off the clock, he could hear a commotion coming from nearby. He blinked, wondering what all the fuss was about, before he remembered. Today—June 30—was Umesato Junior High's annual school festival. Only that morning, he'd eaten a crepe at the booth on the track, gone around to the different classrooms, and watched the kendo team's samurai dance, but those memories didn't immediately come back to him. He was pretty sure he'd met up with Takumu in front of the kendo dojo and had lunch in the cluster of booths in the courtyard before they all went out into the front yard and then—

Rin Kusakabe had collapsed.

“.....!”

His memory finally completely awakened, Haruyuki threw himself forward from the sofa backrest. Around him, the comrades he had fought with were blinking and stretching, but he was the first to stand—or he was about to be, when Fuko pushed him back.

“Uh, um, the Nurses' Room, I—”

“I understand. I'll come with you. Before that.” Grinning, Fuko pulled the emergency disconnect XSB cable from Haruyuki's Neurolinker. If he had stood up with his intended force, he might have

broken the connector. Shrinking into himself, he waited for Fuko to remove her own cable, and then they stood at the same time and moved away from the sofa set.

He turned to the girl in black still seated. "I'm sorry, Kuroyukihime. I have all these things I need to report to you."

"Mmm. Go." She smiled. "I'm sure Kusakabe's waiting for you."

"I-I'll be back soon!" He dipped his head and hurried toward the door.

Fuko followed him. "We'll be back in five minutes."

He was worried about whether Kusakabe would actually be up so soon, but the only thing to do was go and check on her. It was a fair distance from the student council office, which was on the western edge of the first school building, to the nurse's office, which stood at the eastern end of the second school building.

"Um, Master?" he asked Fuko in a quiet voice as they moved as quickly as possible through the hallways jammed with school-festival guests. "You guys took out the ISS kit main body, didn't you?"

"It would seem so, at any rate. Although we had a little help."

"Huh? From whom?"

"Let's talk about that later. What I'm concerned about right now is that the kit terminals might not have actually disappeared when the main body was destroyed."

"Uh...Huh?!" That was more than a concern; it was a serious problem. His feet tangled around themselves in his surprise and worry, and Fuko reached out to steady him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, leaning in, her arm linked through his. "I made you worry. Basically, the kits weren't eliminated, but they *were* sealed. So all the terminals should have been rendered powerless, and the mental interference should have stopped for Rin."

"They were...sealed?"

As long as they were disabled, it didn't much matter if they were eliminated or sealed, but the difference did make him a little anxious. But there was no point in getting all worked up here. He'd know the second he saw Rin's face whether everything was over or not.

Their slippers stepped onto the boundary between the passageway and the second school building. When they turned right into an empty hallway, the door to the nurse's office soon came into view.

Fuko pulled her arm free of his and gave him a gentle push. Taking a deep breath, he placed a finger on the door handle and gently slid it open. "Hello?"

The health adviser, Mitsu Hotta, turned around in her desk at the front of the room and smiled. "You really *are* back soon, hmm?"

Soon? He was about to ask before he remembered. After Rin had collapsed, he had brought her to the nurse's office, and before he had

raced over to the student council office, he had told Ms. Hotta that he had something to take care of, but he would be back soon. Then he'd dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field and fought fierce battles against powerful enemies before coming back here. In terms of his own subjective time, it was definitely *not* soon. But of course, for Ms. Hotta, it had only been a few minutes ago, so all he could do was nod.

The teacher urged him on with her eyes, so he bowed lightly before cutting across the room to a bed in the back that was separated by a curtain. There was only silence on the other side of the spotless white fabric.

He opened his mouth, thinking he should say *something* at least before he pulled the curtain open, but he didn't know what. Was Rin sleeping? Had the interference from the ISS kit actually stopped? Had the battle Haruyuki and his friends fought really been able to clear away the darkness corrupting the Accelerated World?

"Rin, we're opening the curtain," Fuko said on Haruyuki's behalf, reaching a hand out.

Shf! When the curtain was pulled back, he saw the curving line of a white sheet and the short hair, slightly unruly, that peeked out from the top. He entered the cubicle with Fuko and closed the curtain before walking around to the head of the bed.

There, he found the face of Rin Kusakabe in profile, eyes closed, her right cheek on the pillow. Innocence was the perfect adjective to describe this sleeping face. But the only one who could determine whether the interference of the ISS kit was gone was Rin herself.

Fuko gently stroked the younger girl's hair with her fingertips. "Rin."

Her long, soft eyelashes trembled and lifted slightly. After blinking a few times, she opened her eyelids about 70 percent. A hazy light flickered in the pale pupils. She took in first Fuko and then Haruyuki standing next to her.

"Kusakabe," he said, barely moving his lips.

A faint smile rose on her face. "Arita...Master Fuko." Her voice was faint but firm. "In my dream...I heard. Your voices. And the voices. Of many other people. Too. The voices of people. Fighting their hardest to protect. Me—no, the Accelerated World..."

"Rin." Fuko crouched down and wrapped her hands around Rin's small face. "Rin...How is it?" she asked gently but still with a note of tension. Of course, by "how," she meant whether the interference of the ISS kit had stopped.

Several lights bobbed up in Rin's eyes and came together, flickering, to produce shimmering, shining droplets that flowed softly down her cheeks. But these were not tears of suffering or sadness. Rin didn't have to say anything for Haruyuki to know that. "Thank you so

much, Master. Thank you, Arita. I...It looks like. I can still be. A Burst Linker."

"...Rin." Light streaming out of the corners of her own eyes, Fuko used both hands to help Rin sit up and then wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. Watching over this scene, Haruyuki also felt something warm in his eyes.

Master and pupil embraced for a full ten seconds before they pulled apart. Rin turned to him, and Haruyuki opened his mouth to say, *That's great, huh, Kusakabe?* But the instant her slender arms reached out toward him, he forgot his words and stood frozen in place.

But then Fuko, grinning, gave him a push with a force that compelled him whether he liked it or not. Haruyuki took a step toward the bed, and Rin wrapped her arms around him. The instant he was conscious of her softness and warmth and the faint scent of flowers, his brain stopped working. Or at least, he thought it would, but this time, it didn't. Because the overwhelming relief and joy, along with a strange heartache, that rose up in him, pushed away his usual upset and surprise.

He gently touched his hands to Rin's small back and murmured in the ear that was immediately nearby, "I'm so glad...This is really great." The mental interference from the ISS kit that had tormented Rin Kusakabe had disappeared completely. Haruyuki could finally believe it.

Strictly speaking, it had been Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, and Utai who fought with and destroyed the ISS kit main body at Midtown Tower. So maybe Haruyuki himself hadn't been able to keep his promise to save Rin and her older brother, Ash Roller. But now, he was able to easily accept that he didn't need to fixate on details like that. Now that he had been shown the Highest Level by Archangel Metatron.

The Accelerated World was much broader, deeper, and bigger than he had ever imagined. And at the same time, it was fragile, precarious, and ephemeral. In that world, a lone Burst Linker shone brightly as best as they could, like a small star. Several people came together and became a star system. Star systems came together to form a star cluster. Star clusters came together to create a single galaxy. Burst Linker duels were proof of the life pulsing through that galaxy. By fighting in earnest, winning and losing, rejoicing and lamenting; light, sound, and story were born in the vast darkness.

Rin and Haruyuki were incredibly tiny stars compared with the enormity of the Accelerated World. But they weren't alone. They could reach out at any time, and there would be someone whose heart was connected to theirs.

All the stars had disappeared from the worlds he saw alongside one another in the Highest Level, Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt. He didn't know why yet, but he firmly believed that he could not let the world of Brain Burst go down the same path. He felt like he understood at least a little of the Green King's motivation in redistributing points without fear or favor. He was fighting back. Against the rules of the Accelerated World that said that those who lost all their points were instantly eliminated. All by himself, he was trying to protect the entire galaxy that was Brain Burst.

Haruyuki couldn't even beat a Lesser-class Enemy solo; there was no way he could imitate Green Grandé. But he could help and be helped by the stars that formed the same star system near him and keep moving forward together. And then that star system would get bigger. Someday, it would be a star cluster.

"I'm so glad...you're not going anywhere, Kusakabe," Haruyuki said, tightening his arms around her, his voice shaking with emotion.

"Me too...I'm glad." Rin replied weakly. "I can see. You again... like this."

"And how long *exactly* are the two of you going to do that?" Two hands reached out and pulled Haruyuki and Rin apart. They turned their heads together and found Fuko's exasperated smile.

"Uh. Um. It's—," Haruyuki stammered, looking at Rin and Fuko in turn as he belatedly realized the excessive boldness of his own action. "Um. R-right. We said we'd be back with the others in five minutes, right? So we should get going. Kusakabe, can you walk? Or maybe it'd be better for you to rest here a little longer?"

"There appears to be no need for that, Corvus." Fuko set herself down on the folding chair that had been left out next to the bed. "I just got an e-mail from Sacchi. She can only use the student council office until twelve thirty, so we'll have the meeting in a regular duel via the local in-school net. Sacchi will start it, I'll be her opponent, and you two can just join the Gallery."

"Oh! R-roger." Haruyuki sat down on the chair next to Fuko, and Rin folded her legs underneath her on the bed. Because it was school festival that day, Rin, who was not a student at Umesato Junior High, had also been given permission for a limited connection to the local net. And Fuko was Rin's parent and master, so of course, she had Fuko on her list of automatic Gallery inclusion.

"Ten seconds," Fuko announced, leaning back.

Haruyuki also waited for acceleration in a comfortable posture. He glanced over at Rin on the bed and saw her lovingly stroking the cracks racing along her Neurolinker shell. The instant he had the thought about how great it was again—*skreeeee!!*—the sound of acceleration echoed in his mind.

The light of the sun was harsh in the almost transparent sky. The ground it hit was also blue as far as the eye could see. The entire field was covered in water.

The Water stage, naturally, was affiliated with water. Unlike the Ocean stage, the water was only ten centimeters deep, so avatars were not submerged, and there were also no large waves. All the buildings were skeletal concrete frames, bleached white by the exposure to the sun, and slight waves lapped across the water surface between them. The scene was beautiful and somehow sad. Some Burst Linkers called it a beautiful fin-de-siècle stage.

Appearing on the roof of a concrete shell a dozen or so meters high and a hundred meters wide—the first school building of Umesato Junior High—Haruyuki allowed himself a moment to take in the watery world before he whirled his head around. Since the Gallery was placed randomly around one of the duelers, Fuko or Kuroyukihime should have been somewhere nearby, but he couldn't seem to find either of them.

So he checked the two arrow cursors displayed in the bottom of his field of view. Both pointed directly in front of him. But there was nothing but the schoolyard, now transformed into a vast, unpopulated pool, glittering in the sun.

"Huh? Where are they?" he muttered, leaning over the edge of the concrete frame. "Did they already go outside the school maybe?"

"Real Down."

He heard a voice from beside him. Concentrating on the town across from the school, he unconsciously asked, "What's that mean?"

"S obvious, you. Real's 'direct' and Down's 'below,' so put 'em together, and you get directly below you."

"That seems kinda off..."

"Oh, really? Then you tell me how to say 'directly below you' in English."

"Um. Maybe 'right under' or something." Absentmindedly continuing the conversation, Haruyuki peered down as instructed and saw two F-type avatars facing each other. One was an onyx black, the other a light-aquamarine blue—obviously, Black Lotus and Sky Raker.

"—?!"

Haruyuki jerked his head up and looked to his right.

Standing there with arms crossed was a fairly large M-type avatar, wrapped in a leather jacket with scattered spikes and wearing a skull-patterned helmet. He wasn't straddling his beloved American motorcycle, but it could only have been the century-end rider, Rin Kusakabe's older brother, Ash Roller.

Magenta Scissor had planted an ISS kit in the motorcycle that was essentially a part of him, transforming it into something strangely half

machine and half living creature. The mental interference from the kit extended to Rin in the real world, and to protect his little sister, he had even gone so far as to vow that he would lose all his points himself. The reason Haruyuki and his comrades had headed into the Unlimited Neutral Field in the middle of the school festival was nothing other than to save Ash and Rin.

Thanks to the hard work of Kuroyukihime and her team, the main body of the ISS kit had been destroyed—he'd learn the details of this at the meeting that was about to start—and all the kit terminals had been sealed away. From the look of him, it did seem that Ash Roller had been cut loose of all influence from the kit.

"Ah...Ah...A—"

Aaaaaash!! Maybe this was the moment when he leapt up and screamed, but since they'd just had that silly exchange, he couldn't figure out what to do. Flapping his mouth beneath his goggles, he stood there, frozen in place.

"Hey, ya damned crow," the fin-de-siècle rider said bluntly, looking out over the endless submerged city.

"Wh-what?"

"Looks like I actually owe ya one now. So I'll say that last one is a no count."

"Wh-what? That last one...is what?"

"Obvioso! You pawing at Rin on the other side in a so-called hug, you mega-dolt!"

"Wh-what?! I-I-I-I'm sorry, big brother, sir!!"

"Who you calling big brother, yooouuuu?! Lemme tell ya right here, this is a right-now, one-time thing only! The next time you go wild with the meaty embraces, mighty me here'll flatten you with my machine! Ultrathin!" Ash Roller shouted wildly, arms still crossed. "That's *thin* like *flat* and *ultra* like *you're weak*, because my mighty self is mega-cooooool!!"

Haruyuki stared at him completely dumbfounded, thinking that this exchange ruined all sorts of things.

"Ash! Cooorvus!" Fuko's voice came to them from the ground—well, watery surface—a dozen or so meters below. "It's going to hurt if you don't get down here in the next five seconds!"

"Y-yes sir, Master!" Ash snapped to attention and peered down. He couldn't actually take any damage no matter how high the jump was since he was a member of the Gallery, but he seemed very reluctant to step over that edge.

"...What are you doing, Ash?"

"Aah, nah, just this rumor. Like, I heard sometimes there're these huge sea slugs or sea anemones or whatever in the water of a Water stage...My fine self and the slithery things, it's just—"

“.....”

Haruyuki silently pushed Ash, and they jumped from the school building together.

“Nooooo!” The century-end rider fell, kicking and screaming, and landed face-first in the water.

Coming down gently beside him, Haruyuki turned to Fuko and Kuroyukihime and dipped his head. “Kuroyukihime, Master. I’m sorry we’re late. Where’s everyone else?”

“They’re all here. Behind you,” Kuroyukihime said.

He turned and saw six people sitting alongside one another on the concrete structure of the first floor of the school building. Naturally, none of their avatars had a scratch on them. The light of the sun in the blue sky reflected off the water and made their semitransparent armor shine brightly. Staring at his comrades, Haruyuki reflected once again on the fact that the long, hard fight was over.

The ISS kit main body was gone, and the darkness that was on the verge of overrunning the Accelerated World had been banished. They had returned to the days when Burst Linkers fought one another simply with techniques, wisdom, and guts in the normal duel field, and Legion members challenged massive Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

However, *she* was not in this world. The pure-white Archangel who had given Haruyuki wings and courage and taught him so many things no longer existed...

“Now then, let’s begin,” Kuroyukihime said. “A normal duel ends in thirty minutes, after all.”

Haruyuki took a deep breath. “Okay!”

Fuko and Kuroyukihime stood alongside each other in the courtyard, a mass of concrete cut from the school building. The nine people who had taken part in the mission, with the new addition of Ash Roller, formed a circle, and the meeting began. Haruyuki spoke first, earnestly.

The school was in the Minato Ward Area—the apparent headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society into which he had chased Black Vise after he abducted Niko. The Archangel Metatron who spoke to Haruyuki when he lost sight of Black Vise and was at a loss as to how to proceed. The decisive battle in the courtyard. Wolfram Cerberus jumping in. The theft of Niko’s Enhanced Armament by Cerberus III, aka Nomi’s copy. The red light that poured down from the sky and the birth of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II...

When he paused for a breath, after muscling through the many dizzying developments, Kuroyukihime dropped her gaze to the

shimmering surface of the water. "I see...In other words, because we destroyed the ISS kit main body, the accumulated negative Incarnate energy was sent to the Society's headquarters and created a new Armor at the worst possible time. Is that it, then...?"

"Not yer fault, Lotus," Niko interjected immediately, sitting cross-legged on the concrete frame. "That damned Argon, she said it. Something about how it was too soon. 'That lot, they went an' did it.' 'That' was deffo the ISS kit main body. And by *too soon*, she meant the timing of the Incarnate energy transfer. Which means those Society jerks were using the main body for storing energy right from the start. If everything'd gone 'zactly 'cording to their plan, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, woulda been two or three or—worst-case scenario—ten times stronger than the thing we fought. This was the right time. We took it down. Couldn't strike the killing blow, though..."

"If that's the case, then I feel a little better." Kuroyukihime nodded. "But all that said, you did well to defeat it. We saw that black explosion from Midtown Tower, but that went far beyond the level of an Enhanced Armament."

"For reals!" Niko threw her hands up into the air. "Like, if you threw that at the Castle, you'd knock a god outta the sky...Heap your praise on your child, there. Without Crow, we'd deffo been wiped out."

Pard next to her nodded her agreement.

"N-no." Haruyuki flapped his hands in front of him. "We managed to win because no one gave up, right until the very end. If it had been just me, I probably would've run away before it even started."

"Don't be so modest, Haruyuki. You are definitely today's MVP," Kuroyukihime said with kindness, and a warm joy welled up in his heart.

But Haruyuki shook his head lightly once more and glanced up at the blue sky. "Thank you. But...it wasn't my power alone. Archangel Metatron loaned me her wings and fought alongside me...If she hadn't been there, I never would've been able to take down Mark II..."

No one responded for a time. Finally, Ash Roller spoke at last to break the silence.

"But, like, Crow, this Metatron, she's like the Enemy boss, yeah? This is a giga-unbelievable story, man. Talking to an Enemy, tag teaming with her."

"Yeah. But Metatron was no ordinary Enemy. We were just born in different worlds, but we have exactly the same spirit...I believe that."

Once again, only the faint rippling sound of water filled the stage.

It was no wonder they were confused. For Burst Linkers, Enemies

in the Unlimited Neutral Field were the ultimate foes. They sent large-scale parties scattering with their overwhelming battle power and occasionally pushed Burst Linkers to total point loss with unlimited EK. And the final objective of that day's mission had been to subjugate the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron and end the blockade on Midtown Tower. He could say that this Metatron had become an ally, but there was no doubt it would be hard to believe right away...

"I believe you!" Chiyuri suddenly shouted forcefully.

Haruyuki let out a small "Huh?"

"I mean, I've actually seen an Enemy and a Burst Linker get close!"

"Seen—? Oh, right, you mean Coolu."

When he visited the Setagaya Area of the Unlimited Neutral Field four days earlier with Chiyuri, Haruyuki had met a level-four Burst Linker called Chocolat Puppeteer. She had spent a long time reaching out to a Lesser-class Enemy of the species Lava Carbuncle and finally tamed it—though really, it was more like joined it in friendship.

Akira also nodded firmly. "There are rare examples of an Enemy being made non-active...or so I'm told. This is the first I've heard of one as high-ranking as a Legend class, but if it's Crow...I feel like I can get on board with that."

"The Sun God Inti even might become friends with C!" Utai declared, causing the whole group to laugh cheerfully.

"I see," Takumu said once the laughter subsided. "That little icon flying around you in that school, that was Metatron herself then."

"Yeah. She was showing us the way."

"No way! I said something about her being a bug. I better say sorry the next time I see her." Chiyuri shrank into herself apologetically.

And the tears he'd been pushing back since this conversation began, just one of them spilled out. It was beneath his mirrored goggles, so he didn't think the rest of the group would notice, but Fuko sitting to his right peered into his face.

"What's the matter, Corvus?"

"Oh, n-no. It's nothing." His voice in reply shook slightly, and he very much could not fool these trusted comrades. Letting one virtual tear after another fall, Haruyuki turned to Chiyuri. "Chiyu...You won't be able to do that. Metatron is...To defeat Mark II, she transformed herself into the light of Trisagion...and she disappeared."

With the group silent once more, Haruyuki haltingly told them about his experience in the mysterious Highest Level. About the things Archangel Metatron had shown him. Had told him. And about the end of the world that she had wanted to see...

Once he'd told them about Metatron's annihilation, there was a full ten seconds of silence. When the timer in the upper part of his field of view reached five hundred seconds remaining, Kuroyukihime started to speak slowly.

"The final Arc, The Fluctuating Light itself, is the reason for the existence of the Accelerated World...Is that what Metatron said in this space, the Highest Level?"

"If that's true, then the world won't end even once someone reaches level ten...Is that it?" Fuko asked in reply, and the Black King slowly moved her face mask up and down.

After another brief silence, she said quietly, "When I attained level nine, the message text that was displayed in my field of view was precisely this: WHEN YOU REACH THE NEXT LEVEL, YOU WILL MEET THE CREATOR AND LEARN THE TRUE PURPOSE OF BRAIN BURST, THE TRUE MEANING OF THIS WORLD."

"Didn't *actually* say the game'd be cleared by someone hittin' level ten," Niko said, having seen the same message herself, her tone faintly angry. "But if we're not clearin' it, why make such a big deal outta level ten? I mean, the condition to make level ten's pretty for real—push five other level niners to total point loss or you don't get to be level ten. What's the point in that?"

"...No idea. The only thing is to ask this creator about the truth... But Haruyuki's story does make me think otherwise than I have been. I feel as though while the creator does wish to see someone reach level ten, they're also afraid of this very thing happening...Something like that..."

Niko groaned.

"If the creator's afraid," Haruyuki said, trying to ignore the bitter pain of loss in his heart, "it might be connected with the end of operation of those two worlds—of Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. If the same creator's behind all three games, then he—or she, maybe—this person only has our Brain Burst 2039 left now. And if someone reaching level ten means, like, the game's final stage begins..."

Metatron had said it on the Highest Level. Long, long ago, plenty of stars had shone in the two parallel worlds, as well. But those lights had gone out one by one until finally they all disappeared. Thus, those two worlds must have produced some "result" a step ahead of Haruyuki's. He didn't know whether someone had made it to level ten and challenged the Castle or whether everyone had lost all their points before that. But at the very least, there was the possibility that this world would go down the same path. The possibility that it would be swallowed up by darkness with no one able to reach the light at the end.

Stewing silently, Haruyuki lightly tapped his right hand to his left.

“You told us a little while ago, Corvus, about the Green King discussing these two ‘trials,’ Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt,” Fuko said, her voice calm. “But now it seems that we need to obtain more detailed information. Ash.”

The man snapped to attention. “H-hhyah, Master?!”

“Please set up a meeting with Grandé soon. I’ll leave the venue to you, but I’d prefer a neutral area.”

“R-roger, yes, Master...So, like, G-G-G-G-Grandé, you maybe talkin’ about our LM?! S-s-s—”

“Seriously for real. Please.” Fuko flashed him a bright smile, and even Ash could not say “Giga impossible!” to that grin.

As Haruyuki watched the petrified century-end rider, the corners of his mouth finally softened. And then he heard a voice from nowhere.

“That won’t be necessary, Burst Linkers.”

Sweet like a young girl, clear like a pure holy woman—a stern echo like a noble queen. Although the elements resembled Metatron’s voice, he could tell that the essential nature of it was entirely different. Or rather, he couldn’t feel anything of the heart of the speaker, and that should have been the essential nature of the voice. A hard, cold, smooth wall completely blocked any empathy.

Who on earth...? Haruyuki started to look around and then noticed something strange about Kuroyukihime.

The Black King, also known as World End, was completely stiff, even more than the petrified Ash Roller had been. A strange light floated up in the eye lenses behind her goggles, but Haruyuki couldn’t tell what kind of emotion it was expressing. He’d never seen the Black King like this before. And yet, Haruyuki felt like he could see the expression on the face of the flesh-and-blood Kuroyukihime that lived in the avatar. It was definitely surprise, animosity, and fear.

Instantly, Haruyuki understood. Or rather, remembered. *I’ve heard that voice before, too. Not directly...In a dream. Within the memories of Chrome Falcon that I shared in the Castle...*

“On the roof!” Niko shouted, and everyone, with the exception of Kuroyukihime, leapt up from their concrete seats and looked up at the northern sky.

A hut that housed the stairwell jutted upward from the center of the roof of Umesato Junior High’s first school building. Someone was on top of it. Not a duel avatar; the slender body was wrapped in a snowy-white summer dress, and long golden hair fluttered in the breeze. A girl. But her face was covered by a platinum mask that

you'd use at a masquerade ball.

A flesh-and-blood girl in the duel field? He was baffled for an instant before he realized it was a dummy avatar for spectator use. In other words, a Burst Linker besides Haruyuki and his friends had slipped into the Gallery for the duel that Kuroyukihime and Fuko had started.

"Who are you?!" Niko's sharp voice flew once more.

Even at this demand from the Red King, the snowy girl didn't so much as twitch. She stood on the edge of the hut and brought her hands together behind her back. A wind gusted up in the Water stage, making the girl's golden hair and dress flap. He found it hard to believe that the lines of her graceful, refined limbs were polygons.

Although she had no butterfly wings on her back, and her coloring was the polar opposite, there was an air about her that was very similar to the avatar in the black dress that Kuroyukihime used in the local in-school net. For an instant, the words *Snow White* flashed through Haruyuki's mind.

When the ripples on the expansive water surface died down, small, perfectly formed lips moved beneath the thin metal mask covering the eyes and nose. "Please ask Lotus for my name later. Right now, we have something more important to discuss."

...She'd called the Black King "Lotus."

Haruyuki glanced over at Kuroyukihime once again. The onyx avatar, the only one to remain seated, did not move a muscle, the swords of her arms and legs still crossed. No, just one place—the top of the sword of her right hand was shaking very minutely. Haruyuki couldn't decide whether this trembling expressed fear or anger.

When he returned his gaze to the top of the school building, the mysterious girl looked directly at him with eyes covered by the mask and said, almost singing, "Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. The reason these two worlds died out...is because both of these worlds were too biased."

"...Biased?" Takumu asked, his tone half guarded, half curious.

"Yes. AA 2038 was filled with excessive fighting...and CC 2040 with excessive harmony. To put it another way, in the world of AA, every player other than oneself was an enemy, and in the world of CC, they were always allies."

While he was concerned about Kuroyukihime, as a gamer, Haruyuki reflexively interpreted the girl's words. Accel Assault was a game with nothing but a so-called free-for-all mode. And Cosmos Corrupt was a game with just a cooperative mode. In which case, both were indeed biased. This was in comparison to Brain Burst 2039, in which all players could be enemies or allies.

But that this bias destroyed the world...What did that mean? He

could understand if it was just the AA world. If the players were constantly killing one another, it was obvious that there would be only one left in the end. But why would the CC world also collapse over the same period when all the players should have been working together to clear objectives?

The girl on the roof seemed to sense Haruyuki's question. "Excessive harmony, excessive cooperation...What these produce is not acceleration, but stagnation. Time stopped in the CC world. And it was destroyed because of that. In that sense, the flow of this world that you all love might also be starting to stagnate bit by bit." The girl chuckled softly.

This sweet echo jabbed at Haruyuki's memory again. Chrome Falcon, the Burst Linker who synced with Haruyuki in the Castle... He'd become the first Chrome Disaster because his beloved partner Saffron Blossom was killed over and over and over before his eyes. In an unlimited EK using the terrifying hell worm, the Legend-class Enemy Jormungand.

It was the Acceleration Research Society's Black Vise and Argon Array who had put together this tragedy. But one other person was also there.

She had been wrapped in a mysterious light, so he couldn't see her, but someone higher up the ladder than Vise and Argon was there. The owner of a sweet, pure, stern voice.

"...It can't be...," Haruyuki squeezed out hoarsely.

Kuroyukihime, who had not so much as twitched up to that point, raised her face mask haughtily. She leapt up high from her seated position and did a backflip before landing on the mass of concrete with a sharp *klak*. She sighted the girl on the roof with the tip of her right sword hand.

"Do you intend to say that *that* was why?!" Her tone was sharper and more severe than her swords. But Haruyuki realized that there was a shared echo, albeit slight, in Kuroyukihime's crisp voice and the sweet song of the mysterious female avatar. "Are you trying to legitimize it by talking like that after you went around distributing a thing like the ISS kits?!"

She yanked her brandished sword downward, slicing through the air.

"Answer me!! White King...and president of the Acceleration Research Society, White Cosmos!!"

The wind of the Water stage ceased. The light of the sun clouded over, and the water surface calmed like a mirror. Thick black clouds rolled in to hide the endlessly clear blue sky. Even though it had to have

been nothing more than a preset weather change event, it was almost as if the stage itself were afraid. Purple lightning bolts began wriggling like living creatures through the ink-black sky. The low rumbling thunder called up wavelets in the water at their feet.

The White King, White Cosmos. Also known as Transient Eternity, the head of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe. Kuroyukihime's parent and her real-life older sister. The very person who had convinced her that the Seven Roads—guns the Red King, Red Rider, created as symbols of peace—were the ultimate weapons of destruction and spurred her toward tragedy two and a half years ago.

She was the only one of the Kings of Pure Color who always had a representative attend the meetings of the Seven Kings that Haruyuki had been a part of, and now Kuroyukihime was saying that she was at the same time the leader of the Acceleration Research Society, another figure similarly shrouded in mystery.

"But...that's..." The voice that spilled from Haruyuki's throat shook so much that he himself could barely hear it.

The other eight were in varying degrees of shock. The one who appeared the most surprised was Ash Roller, who groaned "No way..." without a single word of Ash slang.

Chiyuri, on the other hand, muttered "Of course," which jump-started Haruyuki's brain again.

"Of course?" he asked his childhood friend. "How did you...?"

"Now look, the Society headquarters we slipped into...It was about two kilometers southwest from the old Tokyo Tower, right? And the girls' school Kuroyukihime said the White Legion headquarters was in was basically the same place."

"That's exactly right, Bell." Fuko nodded slightly. "We also realized it when we were moving from Midtown Tower. The White Legion is a cover for the Acceleration Research Society. We were planning to make that announcement at the end of this meeting, but..."

"I never imagined that the White King herself would show," Akira remarked.

"Nor I," Utai added.

The girl avatar standing against the backdrop of the thunder clouds accepted Kuroyukihime's censure silently. The cold wind that had started to blow toyed with the hem of her summer dress and her long, golden hair.

The last to respond was the Red King. She took one step, then another, toward the school building before calling out in a voice that burned with a powerful fire, "You? You're the one pulling the strings here? Not just the ISS kits...Creating the Armor of Catastrophe, the Disaster, and parasitizing one Burst Linker after another with it—that

was your work, White Cosmos?!” A crimson aura rose like flames from her right hand, thrust toward the girl on the roof.

Niko had made her own parent, Cherry Rook, retire through total point loss with her Judgment Blow, because Rook had turned into the fifth Chrome Disaster and was indiscriminately attacking members of other Legions. It had been the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, who had given Rook the Armor of Catastrophe, but even this act of his was likely the result of the Acceleration Research Society’s invisible machinations. Since the dawn of the Accelerated World, the White King and Black Vise had been sowing the seeds of tragedy.

Flames of rage enveloped Niko, while the girl in white looked down at her through her platinum mask.

“We’ve forced you into difficult roles any number of times, hmm, new Red King. But that is proof that we recognized your power... Although, I suppose even saying that, I can’t expect you to forgive us.”

“Yer! Damned! Right! I’ll pay back this debt a hundredfold!!”

“If that is what you truly desire...” The girl—the White King—said with an innocent smile, as if humoring a small child. “Shall I switch from the current normal duel mode to Battle Royale mode right now?”

It took him about half a second to understand the meaning of those words. It was true that if all the spectators of a one-on-one duel agreed, they could switch to Battle Royale, and all the people in the stage would become duelists. The Red King and the White King, neither of whom had a health gauge at the moment, would be able to fight each other. However.

“You serious?” Niko snapped. “You seriously sayin’ you can actually fight us like that?”

Just as Niko noted, the White King had dived into the duel stage using a spectator dummy avatar, and a dummy’s fighting abilities didn’t begin to compare to even a level-one newbie. And the switch to a duel avatar required operating the BB console screen in the real world. Practically speaking, in a dummy avatar, the only possibility was to run—and run desperately. But in the Water stage where the buildings were nothing but frames, there were few blind spots. She might have been the White King, but escaping against ten people, including two kings and four high rankers, in the two hundred seconds remaining, would have been difficult...

No. Wait...There likely was a power in the Accelerated World that could be used wearing a dummy avatar. The Incarnate System.

Was that the source of the White King’s confidence? If she used Incarnate, then even with a dummy avatar, she could keep running until time ran out; maybe she even thought that she’d be able to win? He didn’t know. He couldn’t trace White Cosmos’s line of thought.

Shouldn’t it have been impossible for a King to challenge another

King to a fight so casually like this, almost on a whim? The White King was a level niner bound by the sudden-death rule. If she fought using a dummy avatar, the defensive power of which was equivalent to a sheet of paper, and lost to the Black King or the Red King, both also level nine, she would instantly lose all her points.

Why? For what reason? Somehow, she was able to stand there quietly, not worked up in the slightest.

“...Cosmos...” Kuroyukihime called the name of her parent in a creaking voice. Her left hand flashed as she accessed the Instruct menu. If she pressed the button just three times, an offer to switch to Battle Royale mode would appear before everyone.

Is this a trap? Or is it the chance of a lifetime?

Kuroyukihime stood there, left hand trembling in the air, and Fuko, Sky Raker, and Utai waited silently. The readiness to simply follow their Legion Master became a colorless aura that radiated from the members of the Four Elements.

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt a twitch from the white wings that no longer existed on his back—a sensation he’d felt any number of times in the Unlimited Neutral Field. A warning from Metatron.

Even knowing it was a phantom signal from ghost wings, Haruyuki instantly took a huge step back and cupped Kuroyukihime’s hand in his own. At the same time, he turned to the girl standing on the roof and mustered all his courage. “White King!! Your offer’s not fair!!”

His mental circuits were blown at several levels; his words were basically from instinct.

“...Why do you think so, Silver Crow?”

The moment White Cosmos said his name, a pressure that made him shudder in fear pierced his avatar’s core, but he earnestly braced both feet and continued.

“Because your subordinate, Black Vise, still has one of the Red King’s Enhanced Armaments that he stole! If you’re saying you’ll fight in order to apologize, then you have to give that back first!”

Everyone around him, including Kuroyukihime, looked at Haruyuki with slight surprise on their features.

Meanwhile, the White King on the roof smiled faintly beneath her mask. “I see. Your logic is both understandable and not, but unfortunately, I cannot comply with this demand. That Armor is a very precious hope for me. You’ve no idea how relieved I was when I heard that it had just barely been recovered after it was purified by you all and on the verge of very nearly being taken back.”

“...Hope? What do you mean, hope?” He had thrown himself forward to stop a fight, but when the White King said this, he felt an enormous fire of rage blaze up inside him. He shouted at the top of his

lungs, “You made all those people suffer with the ISS kits...pulled Metatron away from her domain...controlled total-loss Burst Linkers like zombies...stole Rain’s Enhanced Armament from her...forced Cerberus into such a terrible role...And you call the result of all this ‘hope’?!”

And that’s not all. The tragedy created by the White King and the Acceleration Research Society isn’t that. Chrome Falcon. Saffron Blossom. The Beast. The many Chrome Disasters. The first Red King. And now the Black King, my dear Lotus.

Three days before, Kuroyukihime had pressed her face to Haruyuki’s shoulder and sobbed. She had regretted and wept over the fact that, manipulated by the White King, she had stained her hands with a friend’s blood, abandoned friendships, and even destroyed her Legion.

Seeing those tears, Haruyuki had made a vow. When the time came that he faced off against the White King, he had to tell her. Tricking her little sister, making her cry, chasing her out of the house—was this what an older sister, what a parent, does? He had to tell her.

Sucking air into his trembling chest, he got ready to yell with everything he had.

But then Kuroyukihime gently placed the sword of her left hand on his shoulder.

“...Crow,” she murmured, and he knew instantly what she was trying to say.

Now was not yet the time for that. There was an appropriate time and place for the decisive battle with the White King.

“...Okay.” Haruyuki somehow managed to swallow his anger and took a step back. In his place, Kuroyukihime stepped forward—her earlier tenseness transformed into cool resolve.

“Cosmos. Your hope is for all other Burst Linkers to despair,” she announced to the White King. “I’m sure it is for Vise and Argon as well.”

“...That may very well be. But if that’s the case, then what, Lotus?” The question was calm, at best.

“It might not be enough for you to take, but we also have our own hope.” Kuroyukihime was also quiet in her reply. “The many Burst Linkers whose names you don’t even know have their own hope and are fighting in earnest. You might try to knock them down, toy with them, step on them, but our hope—the hope of all Burst Linkers—is not going anywhere. The small fires will come together, turn into a massive inferno, and someday burn away the cold hope that you all spread.”

As she made this bold declaration, a bluish-purple aura rose from

the Black King, making the water at her feet rise up into fierce waves. Almost in response to this display of fighting spirit, bolts of lightning shot down from the black clouds that filled the sky to hit various areas of the first school building. One landed right next to the White King on the roof, but the silhouette of the girl didn't move.

Amid the roaring storm, the older sister—parent—offered sweet words to the younger sister—child. “You’ve gotten stronger, Lotus. I look forward to it...the time when you come to stand against me of your own will...” The figure of the girl blurred in the rain that started to fall.

Mysterious particles of light enveloped her body. “Until then,” the White King said in a melodic voice, “I shall doze a little in a butterfly dream. Good-bye, Burst Linkers. It was a pleasure talking to you...”

Beyond the now-pouring rain, the girl transformed into a butterfly of light—or that was what it looked like. The butterfly danced up into the thunderous sky and immediately disappeared from view.

And then the timer hit zero, and flaming letters announcing that time was up burned a bright red in Haruyuki's field of view.



Rin said that she was fine to get up, so the three said their good-byes to Ms. Hotta and left the nurse's office. For a while, they walked silently down the empty hallway.

"Um." Haruyuki stopped in front of the small hallway that led to the main entrance and looked up at Fuko. "I'm sorry for butting in, Master."

"No need to apologize, Corvus." Even the ever-calm Fuko had a hint of tension playing on her lips as she turned them up in a faint smile. "In fact, I should be thanking you for stopping a fight with the White King. Although, when the battle does commence at some point, I will of course expend every effort...But even as it was presented to us just now, I wouldn't say we had even a thirty-percent chance at victory."

"What?" Haruyuki gasped in surprise—it was ten against one, and the one was a dummy avatar.

"That person..." Rin clung to the hem of his shirt on his left side. "I can't believe she's a Burst Linker...like us. Maybe it. Was because. She wasn't a duel avatar. But...more than that...it was...almost like..." Rin fumbled for the words, and Fuko explained in her stead:

"Almost like she's in a different time flow."

"Oh...Yes. It was. Like that."

Now that she mentioned it, the White King did indeed have an air like that about her. While she proposed changing to Battle Royale mode, it was almost like she was talking about someone else—she seemed like an observer looking down on the duel field from somewhere far, far away.

"What on earth did she show up for?" he asked, half to himself, as he remembered her mysterious words. "I don't feel like her end goal was to eavesdrop on our meeting or anything like that. I mean, she seemed to know so much more than we do. She even knows why AA and CC ended...And how did she get to the stage in the first place?"

And then Haruyuki finally landed on the one thing he should have noticed and dealt with right away. "Oh! Th-this is bad, Master! That duel was via the local in-school net, right?!"

“It was.” Fuko’s expression was troubled.

“And you can only connect to the local net from inside the school. Wh-wh-which means th-th-the White King’s real self is somewhere in this school right now...”

He had just disclosed the most dangerous and deeply critical idea possible, but Fuko and now even Rin simply looked more troubled. He cocked his head to one side. “Huh?”

“Come, come. You’re saying that *now*, Haruyuki?”

He heard a voice from off to his left and turned to find Kuroyukihime, Akira, Niko, Pard, and the others stepping into the second school building from the entrance hall. They’d apparently been on their way from the student council to meet them.

“Look here, Haruyuki,” Niko said with a look of pure exasperation, on the heels of Kuroyukihime’s stunned question. “You gotta notice that stuff the second she shows up in a duel stage like that. And then ya check the matching list the second the duel’s done.”

“...R-right. But—so then, you already checked?”

“Mmm. And we were the only Burst Linkers on the list.” Kuroyukihime walked over to Haruyuki and the others and scrunched up her face.

“She wasn’t there? So then, that means she cut her Neurolinker connection?” But Haruyuki’s guess was quickly shot down:

“No, that’s not it. She was connected remotely from her own Legion territory.”

“What?! To our local net from outside?! Can you even *do* something like that?!”

“It’s not that you can’t, it’s that we don’t allow it...Normally, that is,” the vice president of the student council, who had control over the core systems at Umesato Junior High, added regretfully, leaning back against the wall. “But today, when the school’s opened up for the festival, we have no choice but to lower the firewalls so visitors can connect. With her skill and privileges, it’s possible that she dug a hole somewhere in the network and slipped through...Naturally, I absolutely will not allow such things to happen again.”

Privileges. Maybe she meant that her family in Minato Ward had some connection with the company that managed Umesato Junior High, but he couldn’t exactly ask about that now.

Instead, he dipped his head in front of her. “Um, Kuroyukihime? I’m sorry for suddenly butting in back there.”

“Mmm. No, you don’t have to apologize.” Her response was basically the same thing as Fuko’s, a faint smile playing on her lips. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I was utterly undecided about whether to push the button to switch to Battle Royale. And if I’m uncertain, then now is still not the time to fight.”

Haruyuki felt a bit surprised and very delighted at how surprisingly normal the swordmaster's demeanor was. The appearance of the White King had to have been completely unexpected for Kuroyukihime. He couldn't believe she maintained her composure when faced with her older sister who had manipulated her, betrayed her, and chased her away.

Eight months earlier, when Haruyuki had only just become a Burst Linker, Kuroyukihime had said to him:

That person was once...the person closest to me. I believed this Linker would shine brightly forever at the center of my world and keep all kinds of darkness and cold at bay.

However, one day...one incident, one instant, I realized that this was an ephemeral illusion. Now, you could go so far as to say that, for me, this person is my archenemy.

Ever since, she had been unable to speak of the White King without getting upset. But today, when she finally encountered her mortal enemy again, she had pushed aside all fear and terror to stand tall and boldly declare the fight that was to come. A level-nine king herself, Kuroyukihime definitely wasn't standing still, either. She trained and kept moving forward, seeking to grow stronger.

She had also once said the White King, her real-life older sister, was able to exert the greatest influence on her in the real world, and that if they were to fight, this fact would become a curse and bind her swords. But the Kuroyukihime of today would definitely be able to get past this almost absolute obstacle for a Burst Linker. He had no doubt that she would stand at the head of the Legion to boldly lead them.

Haruyuki gently wrapped his hands around the hand of hers that was still resting on his shoulder. "I'll get much, much stronger before then. Strong enough to have your back in the field of the decisive battle."

"...Mmm. I'm counting on you, Haruyuki."

This would normally be the time when Chiyuri or Niko said something snarky, but even they had gentle smiles on their faces. In the center of the circle, Kuroyukihime gripped Haruyuki's hands tightly in return and nodded deeply before looking around.

"Now then, everyone. After all that fighting, you must be hungry. Let's get some food at the booths and have lunch in our secret box seats."

They went around the refreshment booths in the courtyard and stocked up on the usual offerings—*yakisoba*, *okonomiyaki*, baked potato—added in some more unusual treats—tacos, falafel, samosas—and threw in churros and *taiyaki* for dessert, with enough drinks for them all, of course, and then Kuroyukihime led the party to a place no

one expected—the roof of the second school building.

For Haruyuki, this was a space with no good memories. Up until the second term of grade seven, he had been called up here over and over by three boys in his class and forced to buy them snacks or juice, and he had been beaten up for no reason at all. After he was finally freed, he would hide until the end of lunch in a stall in the boys' washroom in a part of the school where no one ever went and distract himself from his empty stomach in a one-person squash game on the local net.

With Kuroyukihime's help, that bullying had ended abruptly, and he'd barely thought of it since then. But it wasn't as though he'd forgotten those hellish days. That small, hard lump of memories was buried somewhere deep in his heart; he just pretended it didn't exist.

Following everyone up to the roof, Haruyuki hung his head and came to a stop when he spotted a familiar rain stain on the concrete at his feet. Back then, too, he had always stopped here for a moment on the days that gang called him out. Beyond this shadow was territory that was out of range of the social cameras. Once he took a step forward, all the rules against irrational violence would go out the window.

Why had Kuroyukihime chosen this for her box seats? And what on earth were they supposed to see from here anyway?

"Haruyuki."

He hurriedly lifted his face.

Kuroyukihime, who had been walking a little ahead, was now standing on the other side of the rain stain and smiling as she offered him her hand. Half unconsciously, he took it, and she pulled him forward, so Haruyuki was forced to jump over the gash and take a step forward.

What he saw first was a large plastic tarp spread out next to the solar power-generating nano-wire panel. Was this the place she was calling box seats? Sitting down, about all they'd be able to see was the trees of the inner courtyard and the northern wall of the first school building. But then Haruyuki realized that the tarp wasn't the only thing near the solar panels.

A slim metal pole stretched up from the floor. He looked up and found not a floodlight at its tip, but rather a black sphere about fifteen centimeters across with a bluish luster. A social camera.

"Huh? ...How...? There didn't used to be a camera there," Haruyuki muttered.

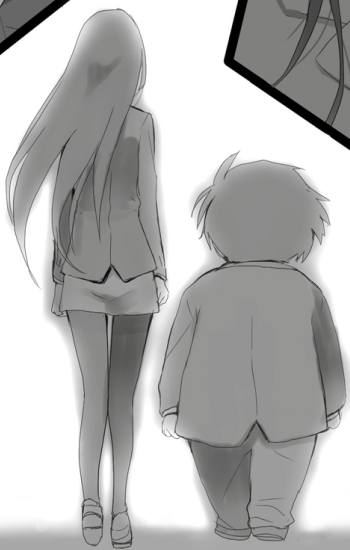
Kuroyukihime stood alongside him. "It took quite a bit of time. But there is no longer a single square meter of this school that is in the blind spot of a camera, and that includes the rear yard and the inner courtyard. I wanted to tell you that."

“.....”

He couldn't say anything in reply at first.

The other eight had probably guessed there was something going on between Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime at the moment. They took off their shoes and slippers and stepped onto the tarp, chattering excitedly as they started to set out lunch. Haruyuki watched them absently.

The social cameras were set up and operated so that the government could strictly monitor the citizenry, including inside elementary and junior high schools, and no one would have said it was a perfect system. In fact, more than a few teachers hated the idea of cameras in schools. Such teachers insisted they shouldn't rely on social cameras to prevent bullying, but rather give the students the independence and power to fight back on their own; i.e., deal with it if you're dragged into a camera blind spot. But practically speaking, the camera blind spots themselves were what produced bullying, this denial of humanity through malice and violence. Haruyuki thought that not having any students bullied right from the start would be much more meaningful than the independence of the school that the teachers fixated on.



“Now no one will ever have to go through anything like that again, huh?” he said finally.

“Yes.” Kuroyukihime nodded firmly. “This was the one thing I felt I absolutely *had* to do while I was a member of the student council... Now, let’s have lunch. We can’t keep everyone waiting forever.”

“...Right!” As he walked over to rejoin their friends together with Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki’s voice was full of the emotions welling up inside him.

The seemingly plentiful lunch they had prepared vanished without a trace from the plastic tarp in a mere twenty minutes.

“Aaah, I’m stuffed.” Both legs stretched out in front of her, Niko patted her stomach, which was so slim you had to wonder where all that food went. “Eating outside’s pretty great. Let’s have a picnic in the park one o’ these days. There’s that big one over by the government building, yeah?”

“Th-there is, but that’s right in the middle of Leonids territory,” Takumu noted hurriedly.

“Listen, Professor.” Niko glared at him out of the corner of her eye. “We can cut the net off for a picnic, at least!”

Utai ran her fingers through the air. UI> IT WOULD BE FUN TO HAVE A PICNIC ON SATURDAY AND ATTACK THE BLUE TERRITORY ALL TOGETHER AFTER EATING.

“H-hang on, Uiui. That would leave Suginami area empty.” Kuroyukihime was quick to interject, and the other girls laughed cheerfully. Rin Kusakabe’s smiling face was also among them, naturally.

While on the one hand, he felt another wave of relief at how great everything had turned out, he also felt several thorns stabbing into the depths of his heart. One of these concerns was just as he had blurted out in the confrontation with the White King: the fact that they hadn’t been able to get all of Niko’s Enhanced Armament back. White Cosmos had called the thruster block still in Cerberus’s possession Armor and said it was a “precious hope.” Which meant the Acceleration Research Society’s scheming still wasn’t over. They were probably going to use Cerberus’s Armor to try to produce a new—and maybe even more massive—problem than the ISS kits.

“You’re not having a good time?” Akira had come to sit next to him at some point, and she offered him a paper cup as she spoke.

“Oh! No, it’s...Thank you.” He accepted the cup at any rate and took a sip of oolong tea. He brought his upturned face back down and found all eyes suddenly on him, so he unconsciously started to drop his head.

“Haruyuki, we still have some time. If you have something to say, you can say it, you know?” Kuroyukihime urged.

He nodded, although he did wonder exactly how much time until what. “Um. The thing that’s just really bothering me...is that we couldn’t get one of Niko’s Enhanced Armaments back.” He looked up at the girl in question, and the Red King merely blinked rapidly in response. This was unexpected, and Haruyuki unconsciously kept going. “I—I mean, Prominence has Territories, too, and all. And you can’t summon Invincible without the thrusters...?”

Niko exchanged a look with Pard to her left, and then they both looked at Haruyuki. Tugging on one of her red pigtails, Niko said, just the slightest bit apologetically, “Nah, I can.”

“.....What?”

“Even without the thrusters, I can summon just the other parts.”

“.....Y-you can?” Haruyuki gaped.

Her slightly contrite look disappeared, and the Red King puffed out her cheeks. “So, like, that knockoff Dusk Taker stole my Enhanced Armament and managed to equip just the four parts without the missile pods, y’know?! Normally, a person’d figure it out then! Listen. Invincible’s an attachment Enhanced Armament with the cockpit block at the center. So long as I got the cockpit, doesn’t matter if the rest is one piece or four pieces!”

“...R-really...?” Now it wasn’t just his mouth; Haruyuki’s eyes were also opened as wide as they could go.

“Well, I guess I’ll say thanks for lookin’ out fer me, at least.” Niko’s puffed-out cheeks deflated as she scratched the back of her head. “And it’s true; just ’cause I can equip the four pieces doesn’t mean I can forget about the thrusters or whatever. Just...I think that’s a problem I need to take care of myself.”

“What—? I’ll help! I mean, you went to the Unlimited Neutral Field to aid us, so we have a responsibility for what happened there.” Haruyuki unconsciously leaned forward toward Niko on the opposite side of the circle he and his friends sat in.

But the Red King curled her lips up in a faint smile, her face a mix of emotion, and then she looked up at the partly cloudy sky as she spoke slowly. “When that Vise jerk had me captive in that school, I was still conscious, still feelin’ stuff. I mean, it was kinda hazy, but I was there. So I was thinkin’ all kinds o’ stuff when that monster took my Enhanced Armaments one piece after another. Like I was gonna hafta give up being Promi’s LM now. Or like, maybe Pard’ll step up and take the reins as LM. But that wasn’t all. Surprised even me, but I was ready to give up, but also the opposite, too.”

She dropped her gaze down to her own small hand and clenched her fingers together tightly. “Level-wise, sure, I’m at nine, but my

power doesn't begin to compare with the other kings. Not in battle or in leadership or mentality." Kuroyukihime opened her mouth to interject, but Niko shook her head lightly with a faint smile still visible. "I was half going with the flow when I became Promi's LM... I've actually always thought that I don't got the right to call myself the second Red King. In my heart somewhere, I was like, I should walk away from the whole mess before the chrome plating peels off and everyone sees how awkward I really am. But then my Enhanced Armament got stolen. *Plus*, my back was up against the wall, like maybe this is it—maybe I'm lookin' at total point loss here. I finally had a *reason* to throw in the towel, y'know? But I didn't want to, suddenly. What I really felt was regret. I didn't want it to end there... Like, I didn't want to betray Promi, not when it's come so far after all that chaos three years ago. I mean, the Legion's stuck with me all this time."

Pard pursed her lips tightly together as if to keep the words that bubbled inside her from spilling out. Niko didn't dare look in her direction, either, but rather looked at Haruyuki and Chiyuri in turn, her hands still clenched into fists on the slender legs that stretched out from her cutoffs.

"I seriously thank you from the bottom o' my heart for taking down the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and gettin' back three pieces of my Enhanced Armament. But I think I need to spend some time really thinkin' about what it means that the one piece is still gone. I hafta learn something from this. Just like you're always doing, Haruyuki. So...don't panic. As long as my thrusters are out there somewhere in the Accelerated World, I know I'll get the chance to get 'em back. Until that chance comes along, I'm gonna rebuild myself so I can *really* call myself Legion Master—and maybe even the Red King. Also, I gotta pay back Metatron somehow, after she disappeared right next to me there." Having finished this long, resolved speech, Niko gulped down the orange juice in her paper cup, looking embarrassed.

The thorn that had stabbed at Haruyuki's heart melted away at her words, but something hot welled up in its place, and he had to blink repeatedly. He didn't think he could speak, so he nodded his head silently over and over.

Sitting on her knees to the left, Kuroyukihime rose to her full height and unexpectedly said, "Niko—no, second Red King, Scarlet Rain. I have something to say to you on behalf of a certain friend."

The tale she then told was a shocking truth. It hadn't just been Dusk Taker that the Acceleration Research Society's necromancer brought back. The memories of the first Red King, Red Rider, had also been revived to produce massive quantities of the ISS kit terminals and had been made to parasitize the kit main body.

“We fought the Rider that appeared from inside the main body. Naturally, it was not the real Rider I forced to total point loss, but rather a reproduction of his memories...But because of this, now, he himself is the lone true BBK.” Kuroyukihime looked directly at Niko. “When he was on the verge of disappearing, Rider said to tell his successor his last words...” She paused very briefly. “Say thanks to number two. She took over Promi for me. Tell her it’s up to her now.”

The second Red King stayed silent.

And then, abruptly, clear droplets rose in her large reddish-brown eyes, flecked with a green that shone brilliantly depending on the light. Her tears soon spilled over, slid down her freckled cheeks, and fell onto the front of her red T-shirt. Perhaps noticing a little too late, Niko wiped furiously at her eyes, but the large tears just kept falling. Finally, she dropped her hand and pressed her face into the chest of Pard next to her. The Legion deputy, who’d long protected her Master, also blinked repeatedly as she held the girl tightly.

As he listened to the youthful wailing, tears sprang up in Haruyuki’s own eyes, too. But this time, at least, he wasn’t alone in his sympathetic tears. Chiyuri, Utai, Rin, Fuko, Takumu, Akira, and even Kuroyukihime all had watery eyes as they watched over the second Red King, now finally the official heir after more than two years.

A minute, then two, then three passed. Lifting a finger to the corner of her eye, Kuroyukihime called out loudly, “Now, it’s getting to be time. It’s starting!”

Reflexively, Haruyuki glanced at the clock in the lower right of his virtual desktop. The display was clear, unaffected by the tears filling his eyes, and showed 13:59:50. He wondered what exactly was supposed to start at two PM before he remembered. He felt like Kuroyukihime had said something about the student council’s festival exhibit starting at two before they dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field. But no matter what class or what gym it was in, they’d never make it in time now—

Clang, clang!

Just as the clock hit two, a light peal of bells rang through the air. But of course, there were no actual bells in the Umesato Junior High school building. Which meant only those connected to the local in-school net could hear this sound via their Neurolinkers. The bell, which sounded very much like Lime Bell’s Choir Chime, rang fourteen times and then stopped—its echo lingering in the air.

“Guests of the twenty-eighth Umesato Junior High School festival and school students,” the gentle, cadent voice of a female student—probably student council secretary Megumi Wakamiya—announced. *“The student council executive will now unveil their project ‘Time.’ Please ensure your Neurolinkers are connected to the network for use at this*

school. *The exhibit area is outside the school buildings. Those of you already outside, please remain there. Those of you inside, please go to a nearby window. Now then, let's begin.*"

The exhibit area's outside the school? Haruyuki looked over at Kuroyukihime. But the student council vice president said nothing—a faint smile lingering on her lips. Takumu, Akira, and the others also looked around dubiously, while Niko lifted her face from Pard's chest as though she hadn't spent the last ten minutes wailing.

Fwssh! He felt a refreshing breeze on his skin. Since the Neurolinker's augmented reality mode could only produce sound and images, this was just a real wind that came along at just the right time. But almost as though it were a signal of some kind, afterward, the back of the tall building he could see beyond the first school building to the south disappeared entirely.

"Ah!" Hurriedly getting to his feet, Haruyuki started to move toward the railing of the roof, but Kuroyukihime pulled him back.

"Haruyuki, everyone, it's easier to see on the other side."

"O-other side?" He turned around as he was told. The roof was only ten meters or so wide, so he should have been able to see Oume Highway and the neighborhood of 3-choume Minami Koenji over the railing on the opposite side.

But the familiar town wasn't there, either. What spread out before him instead was a ocean of grass as far as the eye could see. It was almost like the Accelerated World's Grassland stage, but it was dotted with low bushes, and he could see an enormous river about two kilometers to the north. From the location, he assumed it was the Myoshoji River, but that river was at most ten meters across. The one he saw now looked to be a kilometer to the opposite shore.

They all moved to the railing on the north side and opened their eyes wide in amazement, when, once again, they heard Megumi's voice.

"What you are seeing right now is the view from eight thousand years ago in the early Jomon period. At that time, the end of the Musashino Terrace was a shoreline, and what is currently Suginami was in the center of a peninsula that jutted out into an enormous bay."

"J-Jomon period?!" Haruyuki cried out in surprise and peered directly down over the railing. The grassy plain started immediately to the north of the animal hutch where Hoo, the northern white-faced owl, lived; Umesato was like a ship floating in a massive green ocean.

"Master. So does this mean then...that a video of a grassland is being AR-projection mapped over everything outside the school premises?" Takumu asked, showing off his professorial side.

"Mmm." Kuroyukihime nodded. "Well, basically, yes."

Genre-wise, it resembled the "Koenji Thirty Years Ago" that

Haruyuki had unveiled with his own class, but the scale and difficulty were orders of different magnitude. To simply overlay AR images onto the classroom wall, they only had to set up markers in the corners. He had no idea what you would do exactly to overwrite an entire town. Sighing in admiration, he shifted his gaze from east to west, and further explanation came from Megumi.

“In this era, the Musashino Terrace was an important place for the people who lived in Tokyo in the Jomon period. They built pit-style homes near the water and went hunting and gathering in the vast grasslands. Earthenware and stone tools have been excavated in nearly every area of Suginami, and large-scale ruins have also been discovered in the southern area of the ward.”

Abruptly, a throaty howl rang out across the grassy plain.

“Ah! Over there!” Chiyuri jabbed a finger into the air.

He followed it with his gaze and saw ancient humans with simple lances and bows in their hands, clad in garments made from pelts and coarse cloth, chasing an enormous boar, large enough to be a Wild-class Enemy. They then disappeared, and several cone-shaped residences appeared in the grasslands. In the plaza, women worked together cooking, while children frolicked around them.

“It was eight thousand years ago. But those children. Looks like they haven’t. Changed so much from us...now,” Rin murmured.

“I suppose not,” Fuko said. “Actually, it’s not only the Jomon people from eight thousand years ago; even the first Homo sapiens who appeared two hundred fifty thousand years ago were basically the same as modern humans in their brain structure. If you gave those children Neurolinkers and a modern education, they’d probably grow up just like us. Although happy or not is another question.”

UI> THAT LAST BIT IS VERY YOU, FU.

Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime and the others laughed at this, with even Niko guffawing loudly, her eyes still swollen and red. As he joined them, Haruyuki quietly puzzled over the meaning of it all.

This exhibit was indeed amazing. It must have taken an enormous amount of time and effort to prepare. But why the Jomon period? Because it was easier to create a video of grasslands? But he found it hard to believe Kuroyukihime and the student council would choose their topic for a reason like that.

“Now then, let’s move the era forward a little,” Megumi said, surprising him. The number –8,000 appeared in the lower part of his field of view and began to drop with intense speed.

The exhibit from then on was nothing short of stunning. All at once, several thousand years passed to bring them to the Yayoi era twenty-three hundred years earlier. Wetland rice farming had begun, and the green plain was transformed into a golden-yellow rice field.

Seventeen hundred years ago—the Kofun period. The ancient state formed, and the control of the Yamato royal authority reached Musashino. The tools for working the fields and hunting, along with weapons for humans to fight humans, were now metal.

Fifteen hundred years ago—Asuka to Nara eras. Powerful regional clan chieftains known as *kuninomiya* appeared, and Musashino Province was established in the Kanto region by Chieftain Musashino. This was when the regional name Musashi appeared for the first time.

A thousand years ago—the Heian era. In Kansai, the nobles exulted in the height of their glory, but in Kanto, the warrior clans—the so-called *bandomusha*—rose to prominence a little earlier, and large domains took shape. Although the Musashino provincial government had been set up in the city of Fuchu, not so far from Suginami, antagonism among nobles on appointment from the capital and local warriors deepened, eventually leading to the insurgency of Taira no Masakado, the most well-known of the *bandomusha*.

“All we ever study in school is the stuff that happened in the west in the Asuka and Heian eras, but there was stuff happening here, too, huh?” Haruyuki murmured as he watched the warriors cross swords on horseback.

“You’re totally right.” Takumu tilted his head so his glasses shone in the light. “We live in Tokyo, so we should really take up more of the history of the east in class. For instance, the Musashi Shichito, warrior groups that sprang up here in Musashino, were assigned important positions in the Kamakura bakufu. It wasn’t just Kiyomori and Yoritomo establishing the samurai government; these eastern warriors were in there, too—”

“Come, come, Takumu. I know that as a samurai, you get excited about these warriors, but don’t go getting on ahead of the show,” Kuroyukihime interjected with a wry smile, and Takumu dropped his head, embarrassed. All the while, the times continued to flow past with Megumi’s smooth narration.

Eight hundred years ago—the Kamakura era.

Six hundred years ago—the Muromachi era. With the formation of medieval samurai society, several small villages appeared in what was currently Suginami Ward. The area around Umesato Junior High was a village known as Ozawa, and the temple at the center was called Koenji.

And then they passed through the warring-states era to four hundred fifty years ago—the Edo period. Many tough laborers were transforming the narrow path to the immediate north of Umesato Junior High into the broad town road. The narration informed them that the Oume highway they came to school on every day had been built for the construction of Edo Castle, and they all cried out in

surprise.

A large, imposing procession appeared on the highway. This was the procession of the third shogun, Iemitsu Tokugawa, who was said to have enjoyed falconry in Ozawa. Because Iemitsu would sometimes stay at Koenji, the name of the village eventually changed to Koenji. Looking ahead of the falconry procession on their way home, Haruyuki saw the majestic figure of Edo Castle's *tenshukaku* tower keep rising, looming above the streets of Edo.

"The Castle," Akira murmured, and they all nodded, each weighed down with their own thoughts.

But finally, the Great Fire of Meireki burned Edo up. The tower keep was also burned down, and the night sky was dyed a brilliant red. In the present year of 2047, the social cameras would no sooner catch the signs of a fire starting than they were sending the information to the fire department network, so there were basically no large-scale fires, and the fearsomeness of the great blaze of Edo left them all at a loss for words.

But the gutted town was immediately rebuilt. The development of the relay station that opened to the immediate east of Koenji, Naito Shinjuku, continued, and they could clearly see the bustling streets of town from the roof of Umesato Junior High. There were any number of great fires after that, but the city continued to develop at a speed that far surpassed the fires. The culture was overripe, and the wind of a new era finally blew in the town of Edo, which boasted the largest population in the world at that time.

One hundred seventy years earlier—the Meiji era. This was the start of the Westernization movement, and the tree-and-paper-town streets changed to stone. The light of gas lamps bled into the night fog, and horse-drawn carriages passed on the cobblestone lanes. Finally, the laying of railroads began, and Kobu Railways started operation between Ochanomizu and Hachioji. A British-made K1 steam train raced along an open field a little way from the highway, puffing black smoke, and children chased after it, cheering. At the end of the Meiji period, Kobu Railways was nationalized and became the Chuo Line.

One hundred thirty years earlier—the Taisho era. Koenji Station was built between Nakano and Ogikubo stations, and a new town sprang up around it. Of course, this wasn't yet the overhead rail line, and the station building was surprisingly small, but it was in exactly the same place as the current Koenji Station. The steam locomotive ran ahead of other lines and turned into a train.

And then, a hundred years earlier. The Showa era. In place of carriages, automobiles began to race down Oume Highway. Naturally, the cars were gasoline engines, and Japanese models like Datsun were

mixed in with the Fords and GMs. Airplanes and biplanes appeared in the sky.

Before Haruyuki knew it, the wild warriors who raced on horseback across the plains of Musashino were a distant vision. Over a period of a thousand years, civilization had made surprising progress, with the feudal system becoming a democratic system to give shape to a peaceful modern society. The sun sank, and the gentle lights of incandescent lamps shone in the windows of houses.

Suddenly, however, an ominous formation of airplanes cut across the sky high above. Black objects fell from the bellies of the machines, and several explosions erupted in Ogikubo before his eyes.

“Huh?! Is this the Pacific War?” Chi Yuri cried out, shaken. “There were air raids in Suginami?”

“Yeah.” Haruyuki nodded and gripped the railing tightly. “There was a factory in Ogikubo that made warplanes, so it was targeted straight off.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable, Haruyuki,” Kuroyukihime said quietly, holding down hair that fluttered in the breeze with one hand. “I had no idea until we were putting together the materials to make this exhibit. And it only happened a hundred years ago.”

“Oh! Uh, I never actually thought about it in relation to where I live, though.”

While they were talking, the sound of engines roared above their heads once more. This air raid was a large one. Firebombs fell from countless bombers, and the town of Koenji was enveloped in flames.

“Ah!” Rin cried out weakly.

The Koenji Station building crumbled in the blaze. The shops and houses in the area were burned up one after the other, the night sky dyed a bright red. And it wasn’t just Suginami; all of central Tokyo was ablaze. The narration informed them that in over a hundred air raids, including the one of the night they were watching, a third of the area of Tokyo’s twenty-three wards had been burned to ash.

In the summer of 2045 when Haruyuki was in sixth grade, a large ceremony to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the end of the war had been held in Tokyo. Bored by himself at home, Haruyuki had watched the broadcast of the ceremony, but he hadn’t been able to feel anything, apart from an understanding that there had been a war a hundred years earlier. That was no doubt because he’d thought wars from long ago were events from different worlds, different times. But that wasn’t the case. One had happened a mere hundred years ago in the town of Koenji, where he lived.

As he stood there watching, time continued its endless flow.

Reduced to a barren landscape in the war, Suginami was rebuilt in the blink of an eye. A new Koenji Station building was also built, and

a brand-new 101 series train began to run along the silver rails. Finally, the era of rapid growth came, and the buildings gradually got taller while traffic on Oume Highway continued to increase.

Fifty years earlier. Forty years earlier. Thirty years earlier. The town steadily approached the form it had been in Haruyuki's memories. The combustion engine cars moved through hybrids to eventually become electric and fuel cell vehicles, while the people coming and going on the sidewalks gripped portable terminals in their hands.

"Ah," Chiyuri gasped. "The social cameras."

He looked closely and saw that black spheres—the social cameras—had appeared all over town at some point. The introduction of the cameras had actually happened with similarly little fanfare.

Another significant change that didn't look like much happened right away. The terminals disappeared from people's hands, and in their places, wearable transmission terminals—Neurolinkers—began to appear on their necks. The counter in the bottom of his field of view read —0015.

On the other side of Koenji Station, a large skyscraper condo with a shopping mall appeared. Haruyuki's parents had bought No. 2305 in this building, and Haruyuki had been born the following year. Even though he knew it was only a reproduction, he stared at the windows in the area of his house. He imagined his mother and father, back when they still got along, and himself as a baby living together happily in the gentle light shining through the glass. But the timer quickly passed the year his parents had divorced.

The time it took for the exhibit to move from the Jomon era eight thousand years earlier to the present day was a mere twenty minutes. A rough calculation showed that the scale of acceleration was about two hundred million times. The exhibit seemed to decelerate as it grew closer to the present day, but even still, the fourteen years since Haruyuki was born were equivalent to a tiny spark in the long history. A time so short and insignificant that he couldn't find any meaning in it.

But this exhibit, "Time," was not trying to make that point. History was a series of human activities. Perhaps even time itself was. They were alive right now in the midst of the flow of vast time. The time in which all people had lived was spun into thread and woven into fabric to create the long picture scroll that was history. And that flow would continue on from now. Forever. Endlessly. This was what the exhibit was telling Haruyuki and his friends.

"Our long historical journey is approaching its end," came the quiet announcement to bring the exhibit to a close. "Please look to the sky now."

Haruyuki and company all turned their heads skyward. Although the actual time was not yet two thirty, the sky was dyed the bright red of twilight.

The counter finally reached 0000, but the digit on the right end went just a little farther ahead and stopped at +0005. A series of glittering lights approached from the distance of the twilight sky. They stretched out—perpendicular and endless—into silver threads. A ladder that continued up to the Heavens. It was...

“Hermes’ Cord!” Haruyuki shouted, unconsciously throwing himself backward, losing his balance, and very nearly falling down. But Kuroyukihime grabbed his right arm—and Chiyuri his left—to keep him on his feet.

Wordlessly, Fuko took Kuroyukihime’s right hand—and Takumu Chiyuri’s left. Rin, Akira, and Utai similarly held hands. Finally, Niko and Pard joined in, and the ten formed a large circle on the roof.

The space elevator, Hermes’ Cord, was classified as a low-earth orbit type, but since it flew along at the supersonic speed of Mach 10 at the super-high altitude of 150 kilometers above the ground, to the naked eye, it was nothing but a small point of light. But the threads of this god of flight reproduced as an AR image approached slowly, low enough in the sky that they could clearly make out the details of the bottom station, and stopped directly above Umesato Junior High. The tip of the 40-kilometer-long elevator—made principally of carbon nanotubes—melted into the sky where madder-red changed to indigo blue and disappeared from view. A silver transport ship piled with some kind of cargo ascended from the station.

“Five years from now, in 2052,” the narration recommenced, “the world’s first international manned Mars mission will begin. The parts for the spacecraft will be carried to Hermes’ Cord’s top station, and the ship will be assembled in orbit. People who once ran through the grasslands of the Jomon era with stone lances in hand will step onto the soil of Mars eight thousand years later. But this doesn’t mean we will stop there. Humanity will continue to move forward for hundreds, thousands more years. Our parents’ generation, our own, that of our children—we will all walk that path.”

The transport ship, having reached the edge of the sky, flickered brightly and disappeared. Hermes’ Cord started to move again and receded, swallowed into the large twilight sun.

“This concludes the student council executive’s exhibit ‘Time.’ Thank you for joining us.”

With Megumi’s announcement, the counter disappeared, and the red of twilight faded until the cloudy sky returned. But that was the only change that happened in his field of view. Because the view spreading out beyond Umesato Junior High had already become one

with the AR image.

There was a slight pause, and then an enormous applause swelled up from inside the school. Haruyuki also let go of Kuroyukihime's hand and slapped his hands together enthusiastically, and his friends quickly joined him.

Niko had supposedly stopped crying, but something bright rose in her eyes once again. Without bothering to try to hide this, the second Red King said, "I'm glad I came today. I can really feel the meaning in me being born, becoming a Burst Linker, and making friends with you guys." Wiping roughly at her eyes with a fist, she continued jokingly, "Buuut, Kuroyukihime, you know you got high school exams, yeah? Can't believe you had the free time to make something huge like that!"

"Y-you don't have to mention that now," Kuroyukihime retorted, her face grim, and everyone laughed out loud. Soon, she was smiling, too, as she shrugged lightly. "And it's not like I made it by myself. The president's surprisingly good at this sort of thing...Well, I *did* use up thirty points, though."

"Ah, no fair!" Chiyuri yelped.

"It is not 'no fair'!" Kuroyukihime argued immediately. "There is no more just use of Burst Points than this!"

Everyone raised their voices in laughter once again.

Watching over this cheerful back-and-forth among his comrades, Haruyuki made one hard decision in his heart. When Lime Bell took apart the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he'd had the thought that Citron Call might be able to rewind the extinction of Metatron, too. That hope—or regret—was still there. If there was even a 0.1 percent chance, he felt compelled to try it.

But.

Chocolat Puppeteer, who he'd met in the Setagaya Area, had explained to him that when a dead Enemy is restored, it's at best the same species of Enemy; the exact same individual is not reproduced. The bond that took long hours to build was gone forever.

Even if he could bring Metatron back, there was no guarantee it would be the proud Archangel who fought Haruyuki, helped him, spoke to him, and was destroyed protecting him. If she regenerated as a completely new Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron, that individual would immediately kill Haruyuki and Chiyuri on the spot.

He wasn't afraid of being attacked. But Metatron's essential nature was a "soul" that had lived in the Unlimited Neutral Field the vast amount of time of eight thousand years—in terms of human history, from the Jomon era to the present day—cultivating knowledge and deepening her thinking. To revive her as a soulless Enemy was a desecration of *his* Metatron. Above all else, she herself would not want

that.

“What’s. The matter...Arita?” Rin had come up beside him at some point, and now she tugged on his sleeve, and Haruyuki came back to himself, hurriedly shaking his head.

“Uh, oh, no, it’s nothing. I was just, um, thinking about stuff.”

“I’ve. Thought a lot. Too. Like. I have to cherish. The time I spend with you. Like this...Even more than. I have...”

“Uh, oh, y-yeah, right.” Haruyuki started to nod, and Kuroyukihime grabbed his collar; Fuko, Rin’s sleeve.

“Haruyuki, I’m very happy that the student council exhibit caused you to think about a number of things, but I didn’t intend the takeaway to be that you should deepen your relationship with any particular girl.”

“That’s right, Rin. I would appreciate it if you would also cherish your special training with me as much as the time you spend with Corvus.”

““R-right...”” Haruyuki and Rin replied together.

“The message I got was there’s no time to waste,” Pard commented coolly. “There’s thirty minutes left until the school festival ends at three.”

“Oh yeah. Anything you wanna recommend that we haven’t seen yet?” Niko asked, having completely wiped her tears away.

Haruyuki thought a minute, the collar of his shirt still gripped from behind. He’d already shown them his own class’s exhibit, and anyway, after they’d all been knocked out by the student council’s super-junior-high-student-level AR display, he would be too embarrassed to show them the work he’d finished up in a single night. Did any of the other classes do something that might be fun...?

Pard was apparently headed for even greater impatience in life, because she said, as though she just couldn’t wait any longer, “Then we show Kuroyuki, Chiyu, and the professor Haru’s class’s exhibit, too.”

It appeared that the two members of the Red Legion had decided to call Kuroyukihime “Kuroyuki,” Chiyuri “Chiyu,” Takumu “the professor,” and Haruyuki by his full name or “Haru” in the real world. This kind of nickname normally came into existence spontaneously at some point, but his heart couldn’t help but skip a beat at Pard suddenly calling him Haru after going with Crow all this time. He coughed to hide his surprise.

“B-but it’s totally nothing compared with the student council’s display...”

“What are you talking about? I’ve really been looking forward to it. As have Takumu and Chiyuri,” Kuroyukihime said, letting go of his collar.

Chiyu-Taku also chimed in enthusiastically.

“Of! Course! It’s our class display, and if we didn’t have time today, I was going to get you to let me see it after the festival closes to the public.”

“Same here. I’ve been hearing good things about it.”

“...O-okay then, just for a sec...” He nodded slightly, although he was actually happy to hear Kuroyukihime and the others say that.

“Right.” Fuko clapped her hands together and smiled brilliantly. “We’re all together at last, so after that, why don’t we go to the Animal Kingdom again? Sacchi and the others haven’t tried it yet.”

“Huh?” Haruyuki stiffened instantly, and Pard, Niko, Akira, Utai, and Rin looked away awkwardly. But when the still-smiling Fuko went so far as to wink exaggeratedly at him, Haruyuki couldn’t refuse. He turned back toward a doubtful Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, and Takumu. “Uh, um. Okay then, let’s get going to eighth-grade Class C...”

The last thirty minutes of the festival actually saw a number of exciting developments.

Fortunately, the three who hadn’t yet seen “Thirty Years Ago in Koenji,” the class exhibit Haruyuki had worked so hard on—although his hard work was about a hundredth of the efforts of Kuroyukihime—appeared to enjoy it. This era passed by in the blink of an eye in the student council exhibit, but if you looked closely at the recent past of around 2017, it did make you think about all kinds of things...was Kuroyukihime’s comment.

Then they headed toward the problematic eighth-grade Class B’s Café Animal Kingdom. Reina Izeki, the project producer and fellow member of the Animal Care Club, grinned as she led them to a table. “So you’re back, Pres?” Just like the last time, they ordered drinks with animal names. Chiyuri, on her first visit, chose the Kitten’s Prank, and similarly inexperienced Kuroyukihime ordered the Twilight Crow.

When they were done with their drinks, they moved to the stage at the rear of the class, and the eight girls took a commemorative photo by themselves in the *normal* AR animal costumes. Then, at Fuko’s instruction, everyone except Kuroyukihime and Chiyuri left the stage. Without a moment’s delay, the truly frightening Master Raker looked at Haruyuki and said with another wink, “Okay, go ahead, Corvus.”

This is an order. I can’t exactly go against my master’s orders. Haruyuki dug deep into the costume program menu and, abandoning all hope, changed the current selection of ANIMAL FUR SUITS to ANIMAL FUR SUITS S (aka sexy).

Onstage, Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime stared blankly for about two seconds, but the instant they realized that the surface area of the fur covering their bodies had decreased by 90 percent, they let out shrieks he'd never heard before.

"So, Haru." Takumu turned toward Haruyuki at the tail end of their party as they headed for the entrance after leaving Animal Kingdom and pushed up the bridge of his glasses. "Did you get the photo?"

"Yeah. But it was erased in the forced direct connection..."

"It was...? What about recovering the data?"

"Not very likely. But I intend to try."

"...Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Got it. I'll be in touch."

As they talked in low voices, Chiyuri turned around and stared at them. "What're you whispering about?"

"“Nothing.”" The two male members of Nega Nebulus shook their heads in perfect unison.

Three o'clock.

Haruyuki and his friends heard the announcement of the end of the school festival in a corner of the front yard. Once again, applause rose from within the school and then faded out like the tide. The invited guests—mostly students' friends and family—slipped through the front gates and chatted about the festival with smiles on their faces.

The next day, Monday, was cleanup, and the day after that, Tuesday, was a day off in lieu of Sunday. Once that was over, the special atmosphere of the school festival would disappear without a trace. He'd experienced this in seventh grade as well, but he didn't think he'd be able to return to regular life so easily this year.

"Aaah, it's over, huh?" Niko said, stretching both arms out, and then added as if a sudden thought had occurred to her, "You guys don't have an after-party or anything now?"

Whaaat?! Haruyuki nearly shouted, but Kuroyukihime commented before he could.

"That's a good idea...I'd like to say yes, but unfortunately, I have a number of things to take care of and won't be leaving anytime soon. It's impossible."

"You don't gotta come or anythin—"

"It's. Im. Possible! Anyway, everyone's tired today. If you don't go home and get a good night's sleep, tomorrow will be painful."

"Tch! Whatever." Although Niko looked disgruntled, she followed this with a serious yawn.

Pard awkwardly picked up her Legion Master from behind. "We'll

head back to Nerima now. Thanksy. Stuff happened, but it was fun.”

“Pard, once again, congratulations on reaching level eight.” Longtime rival Fuko celebrated Pard’s leveling up and then asked, “So what should I call you in the real, I wonder?”

“Myah’s fine, Fu.”

“...Understood. Well then, I look forward to dueling you, Myah.”

“K.” Pard nodded.

“M’kay, next time, come to us!” Niko waved, and the two members of Prominence disappeared into the throng of people passing through the gates.

Fuko tugged on Rin’s hand and moved forward. “I’ll thank you one last time. Corvus, thank you for saving Rin and Ash.” She bowed her head deeply.

“Th-that’s— It wasn’t just me,” Haruyuki hurried to reply. “All of us worked hard to make it happen...And it was you and Kuroyukihime and the others who destroyed the main body and all.”

“But that all began because of your desire to help Rin.” Fuko smiled.

“Um.” Rin arranged her hands in front of her and bent deeply at the waist. “Me. And my brother. We both really, really. Really appreciate what. You did, Arita. I’ll do whatever. I can to pay you. Back. First, I want to. Materialize as soon. As possible, like. Master said.”

What? He was confused, but Rin bowed her head once more with watery eyes, so he simply said, “Me too. I’m really happy that you and, of course, Ash came back to us, Kusakabe. Tell your brother I’m looking forward to our next morning duel.”

“Yes. Of. Course!” Rin nodded.

“I have to thank you, too.” Akira stepped forward and turned to Haruyuki and the others. The ever-cool eyes beyond the red frames of her glasses softened as she continued. “Thanks for freeing me from the Castle. It’s like a dream to be able to fight with everyone in that world again. We still have mysteries and problems to solve. But we can take them one by one. We’ll figure it out.”

At last, Fuko, Rin, and Akira all bowed together once more and headed toward the side gate. Fuko would probably give them a ride in her car. Once they disappeared from view, Utai’s fingers flashed.

UI> NOW THEN, I WILL GIVE HOO HIS SUPPER BEFORE I ALSO GO HOME. THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR INVITING ME TODAY.

“Oh, I’ll help you,” Haruyuki naturally offered as president of the Animal Care Club.

UI> NO, I WILL BE FINE ALONE TODAY. ARITA, YOU MUST BE MORE EXHAUSTED THAN YOU THINK. YOU REALLY MUST HURRY HOME, EAT A BIG SUPPER, TAKE A LONG BATH, AND GET A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP. Utai rebutted him like an

older sister even though she was the much younger one, and Haruyuki tried to argue with a “B-but”; however, he was cut short by the words that flowed across his field of view. UI> THAT’S AN ORDER FROM THE SUPER-PRESIDENT! Utai tapped out with a grin.

“That’s right, Haruyuki.” Kuroyukihime’s smile was slightly wry. “Go home and rest. Otherwise, the cleanup tomorrow will be rough.”

“Yeah, Haru!” Chiyuri immediately chimed in her own encouragement, and Takumu was not far behind.

“They’re right, Haru.”

So he was forced to nod in agreement. Thinking that those two had to be just as tired as he was, he asked if they could walk home together, but Chiyuri had track and Takumu, kendo. He felt like he was forbidden to even offer to wait, so he simply said, as a good-bye, “Um. Okay, then, Shinomiya, say hi to Hoo for me.”

UI> I’LL MAKE SURE TO DO THAT!

“And, Kuroyukihime, I really was impressed by that exhibit. The crepes at your booth were delicious, Chiyu, and Taku, your samurai dance was amazing. Thanks for a great school festival, everyone.”

Kuroyukihime and the others all exclaimed, “Thanks, everyone!”—with Utai via chat, of course.

In that moment, Haruyuki felt keenly that that year’s school festival was over. They still had to clean up, but for eighth-grade class C, at least, all they had to do was take down the panel boards and put the desks and chairs back. They could probably finish that in the morning the next day.

And so the long June finally ended. Morning would bring the start of July. They’d have finals and the closing ceremony, and then it would be summer holidays. No one could stop the flow of time. The future kept pushing in, changing the present to the past. At the very least, he wanted to spend each and every day—each minute, each second without regret, if possible. To pay back all the people who had guided him so far.

Haruyuki waved a big good-bye at his friends and slipped through the clock-shaped gate and out of the school.

But the truth was, he didn't want to go home by himself. He wanted to hang around the school until the mandatory departure time and chat with someone about nothing. Or have an after-party at his house like Niko suggested. He wanted Chiyuri and Takumu to stay over, so they could all fall asleep after exhausting themselves with retro games.

If he could've greeted the next day like that, the heavy, painful throbbing of the thorn still piercing his heart would have maybe been less.

He passed through the entrance to the skyscraper condo, the exterior of which had faded to some degree since its construction fifteen years earlier, and took the residents' elevator to the twenty-third floor. He walked down the hallway, unlocked his door, and opened it.

"...I'm home," he muttered, but there was only silence in the dark house. His mother was on a business trip overseas and wouldn't be back until late that night, and today, at least, there would be no surprise attacks from Niko. He slowly took off his shoes and washed his hands and face before going to his room and changing out of his uniform and into a T-shirt.

He glanced at the time, but it was not yet four o'clock. He'd left the house at eight thirty that morning with Niko, who spent the night, so it had only been a mere seven and a half hours since then. If he counted the long mission in the Unlimited Neutral Field, then, in subjective experience, he had spent nearly three times that amount away, but his heart couldn't keep up. The reality of standing alone in his room seemed like a fake experience created by someone else.

This curious sensation would probably go away if he did the things he usually did when he came home. With this in mind, he opened the to-do list on his virtual desktop, but there wasn't a single task on it. Of course, there would be no homework on the day of the school festival, and there were no files he needed to submit. In that case, he thought maybe he should have a big room-cleaning session, but he couldn't find the energy.

His thoughts chased themselves round and round, and his body

gradually grew heavier, so Haruyuki flopped onto his bed. He rolled over and looked up at the ceiling. Although he considered just going to sleep, he didn't actually feel sleepy, even though he *was* tired. He intertwined his fingers behind his head and let his rambling thoughts drift.

In the fierce battle fought by Kuroyukihime, Fuko, Akira, and Utai, the ISS kit main body had been destroyed. All the terminals—the black eyeballs that parasitized Ash Roller, Magenta Scissor, and dozens of other kit users—had now been completely wiped out. There would be no more threat of Dark Shot or Dark Blow in duels, nor any spread of the kit infection.

But they had a new problem. Wolfram Cerberus had vanished due to a forced disconnect in a state of near death, with a mere ten Burst Points remaining. And Invincible's thruster was still in his possession.

Niko had said not to panic, but they needed to recover and purify the stolen thruster as soon as possible. Some element of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, likely remained in the Enhanced Armament, and knowing the Acceleration Research Society, they would try to use this for some new sinister design. Cerberus was...He was Haruyuki's rival and friend, and they needed to completely cut out the root of the evil before Argon Array and the others toyed with him any further.

Also, just because the ISS kits were gone didn't mean that the memories of the people who had used them were also gone. Some people had experienced serious mental interference and beaten down what had been friends and fellow Legion members with the kit's power. And some had forcibly infected Burst Linkers around them with the kits.

What would Magenta Scissor and Olive Grab do now? Did they still have somewhere left to go? He hoped they could come to a consensus that it was the Acceleration Research Society they should turn their hatred toward. *They* were the ones who had disseminated the ISS kits. The crimes of former users should no longer be a question. But he would have to wait for the decision of the kings.

And kings...the White King and her abrupt appearance in the local net duel...She was Kuroyukihime's parent and real-life older sister, and now the shocking fact that she was also the president of the Acceleration Research Society had been made clear, but Haruyuki couldn't decide how to process this. If they denounced her without a scrap of physical evidence, there was the risk that this could be used against them at a moment's notice as a pretext to expel Nega Nebulus. In the end, he had to leave this, too, to Kuroyukihime and Fuko.

In short, there was nothing Haruyuki could do right now. The recovery of the thruster, getting Cerberus away from the Society, the condemnation of the White King—these were all problems he could do

nothing about on his own. And he had only destroyed the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, somehow because Niko, Pard, Takumu, Chiyuri, and...Metatron had helped him.

Haruyuki squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

The Archangel Metatron had helped Haruyuki time and time again, and now she was gone. Faced with this fact once more, his eyes grew hot. In subjective time, it had been a mere three, four hours earlier that they'd first exchanged words before fighting together, and then she'd disappeared. That was it. And she wasn't even a Burst Linker. So why did he feel such a strong sense of loss?

It has to be because I was happy, Haruyuki answered the question he had posed. *All this time, the Enemies have only been rivals to defeat. And then one talked to me—a powerful Legend-class, the terrifying guard of the impenetrable fortress Midtown Tower. I was so happy she talked to me—that she became my friend.*

No. That's just me finding a reason after the fact. The truth is that I really liked Metatron... When he lifted his eyelids, the tears that had filled his eyes absorbed the yellow light shining in through the window, making it flicker and sway.

Metatron had been chasing after the reason the Accelerated World was created and the meaning of her eight thousand years of life. She said she wouldn't care if it meant her own extinction even, as long as she got to see the end of the world...

Haruyuki had been able to communicate to her the immensity of the real world that existed outside the Accelerated World. The nearly limitless scale of the time that had passed up to that point in the real world; that would continue onward from that moment as well.

Through the high-performance glass, he could just barely hear the sounds of traffic on Kannana Street. Right about now, the families enjoying a Sunday of shopping in the mall on the ground floor were probably heading home. In this place where Jomon children of eight thousand years ago ran around, where warriors ran wild a thousand years ago on horseback—in this burned-out field of the firebombings a hundred years ago where Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Takumu had played hide-and-seek ten years ago, time continued to flow. In the real world...and in the Accelerated World.

Maybe I'll go say good-bye, he suddenly thought.

Utai and Kuroyukihime had told him to make sure to rest, but they'd forgive him, surely, for just a little dive—thirty minutes or maybe an hour. And for the fact that he used ten points. Because Metatron definitely would have been their comrade, too.

He closed his eyes, and the tears that built up there flowed down his cheeks. Not bothering to wipe these away, Haruyuki murmured softly, "Unlimited Burst."

The Unlimited Neutral Field he returned to after three and a half hours in real-world time was dyed a pure white. He touched the crystals of snow falling soundlessly from the ashen sky with an outstretched palm, and they immediately melted and vanished. The skyscraper condo that rose up at his feet had transformed into an enormous mass of ice.

An Ice stage. Given that the stage did not allow entry into buildings, he had appeared on the roof of the condo.

“So there was a Change, huh?” he muttered, but that was only natural. Three and a half real hours was equivalent to about 146 days in the Accelerated World. He slowly lowered himself onto the ice block, covered in about twenty centimeters of snow. Metal-color avatars did have resistance to ice damage, but that didn’t mean they didn’t feel the cold. But right now, he felt fond of even the chill that pricked at his nervous system.

“You said you hated the Hell stage, but I wonder what you thought of the Ice stage,” he spoke to himself as he pulled up a lump of snow with both hands. There was no voice in return, but this was Metatron. Her entire body was a snowy white. He was sure she had liked this pure-white world. Still sitting on the edge of the roof, he stared to the southwest.

The falling snow obstructed his view, so he couldn’t even see the government building in Shinjuku. But in that direction lay Tokyo Midtown, where they had fought a fierce battle with Metatron’s first form...and farther beyond that was the old Tokyo Tower and Shiba Park.

“I wanted to see what your Castle was like...”

Now that he thought about it, although he’d been to the old Tokyo Tower where Fuko had set up her hermitage any number of times, he’d never even seen the entrance to the dungeon below Shiba Park. But he probably wouldn’t visit it now. The masterless Castle would only make his sadness grow.

And then Haruyuki suddenly realized. Maybe he didn’t need to get Chiyuri to use Citron Call? When an Enemy was defeated, it came

back when a Change happened. Metatron's true body—her second form—had not once been defeated in eight thousand years, but the same rule had to apply to her, too, didn't it? In other words, it was possible that, at that moment, the master had come back to the lowest level of the Shiba Park dungeon.

“.....”

He scattered his momentarily rising hope with a sigh into the chill air. Even if she *had* come back, it was undoubtedly a “new” Metatron. Not the Being who fought her own destiny and longed to see the edges of the world, but an Enemy who simply and faithfully executed its orders to attack any visiting Burst Linkers.

“...Why?” Haruyuki muttered hoarsely. “Why...did you...?”

The person he spoke to was not Metatron. It was the unknown developer who had created the Accelerated World—Brain Burst 2039, along with Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040.

“Why did you give Metatron a mind? For what reason did you give her the power to think...the ability to worry, feel pain, have hope? Why did you give her the courage to save a speck of dirt like me...a soul...? Why did you give her love?!” He beat his clenched fists against the ice. The large, strong building of the Ice stage didn't so much as shudder. He brought it down again and then a third time, and a sharp pain ran through his fist, but he paid it no mind and kept punching. “Why...why...why?!”

A small crack ran across the armor of his right fist. An agony like he was being stabbed with ice needles raced along his virtual nerves. But it was not enough. Not by a long shot.

That moment, back then.

He'd only watched at that moment, when Metatron transformed her own self into energy and fired Trisagion. He'd only felt her dedication and annihilation from close-up. Wasn't there actually something he could have done?

Incarnate energy if there wasn't enough sunlight. His own spirit when his imagination was used up. Hadn't there still been a way he could have fought alongside her rather than just being protected by her, even it meant he totally fried his nervous system?

“But...But I...!!” He beat down on the ice as hard as he could. Concentric cracks raced outward in the blue mass of ice, and minute fragments of his silver armor scattered. His health gauge decreased, and an intense pain pierced his head.

Again. And again.

The armor on his hands peeled away to reveal the dark gray of his avatar's naked body. If he kept hitting the ice, his arms themselves would shatter and scatter. But he didn't care. He would keep tasting this pain until he himself was gone.

As if in response to Haruyuki's feelings, a strong wind started to blow, and a snowstorm fell upon the stage. Wrapped in swirling white flakes, he moved to bring his peeling fists down hard on the ice again.

...still...there.

He felt like he heard someone's voice from far off in the distance somewhere. He stopped breathing. Hands still in the air, he cleared his ears. In the middle of the roaring snowstorm, he desperately sought out the voice.

...you're...still...there.

It was calm—a silky-smooth mezzo-soprano. A female voice...but different from Metatron's sweet, clear soprano. It wasn't Kuroyukihime's or Fuko's or the voice of anyone Haruyuki knew.

"Who are you...?" he asked hoarsely, slowly lowering his hands. "What's still there...?"

...am...terasu. Meta...sworn friend.

Like tuning an old radio transmission, the voice gradually grew louder and clearer. Haruyuki forgot about the pain in his hands and focused his mind intently.

...The link to...Meta...core is...still inside y...

...It depends on you whether the core can be recovered. On the strength of this power you all call Incarnate.

...There's not much time left. Before the core vanishes...

...Reach out your hand. If you...then...surely...

The voice receded rapidly and disappeared.

No matter how hard he listened, all he could hear was the roar of the blizzard. He almost believed it had been an auditory hallucination brought on by his endless regret, but it couldn't have been. The link with Metatron was still inside Haruyuki. The mysterious voice's proclamation had been entirely unexpected.

"Inside...of me...", he muttered, dumbfounded, and then clenched his hands together tightly. Metatron's core could be recovered if he had enough Incarnate power...That's what the voice had said. And also that there was no time.

If there was even a chance, he had to take it. But he didn't know what he should do. To activate the Incarnate System, a focused imagination was necessary. But he had absolutely no idea what the

shape of the image would be or its target...

He was on the verge of looking around to try to find the someone who had told him this, but he restrained himself. *There's no one but me here. The only one who can reach out to Metatron is me. This is a time when I have to think by myself, work by myself, and make it happen by myself. My promise to Metatron...the promise to see the end of the world together, it's now.*

If he still had a connection with Metatron, then the key to it was the wings. The Enhanced Armament, Metatron Wings, that the Archangel had loaned him—the wings that had saved Haruyuki from a crashing death in the final moments of the battle with Mark II.

He knelt on the ice, clasped his hands together in front of his face, and imagined them. Elegant, sharp, pure-white wings stretching out a little above his shoulder blades. Metatron had warned him of danger any number of times through those wings. That sensation...that connection, one more time.

He closed his eyes. The raging storm, the pain in his hands, the cold enveloping his body—it all receded. In the darkness, the image of transient wings stretching out. The image of rising up higher and higher until he reached the end of this world. The image of breaking out of the Mean Field, the Unlimited Neutral Field...Flying to the Highest Level...

“Metatron.

“Can you hear me, Metatron?

“I’m here. I’ve spread the wings you gave me, and I’m flying through the world you loved.

“And I’m reaching a hand out to you.”

Shik!

A small star flickered in the distance in the infinite darkness. A white light so ephemeral, so weak it looked like it would disappear at any second...but from it came a hazy warmth.

Flapping his wings as hard as he could, Haruyuki reached out. *Fwnk, fwnk.* The flickering light was so far away, and his arms were far too short. But distance wasn't the problem. If he believed he could reach...If he changed all the energy his mind produced into the power of belief—if he could just reach out a little farther, a little bit more... See?

Gently, softly, he wrapped the light up in the palms of his hands. And opened his eyes.

The dancing snowflakes. The smashed ice floor. And icicles hanging

from his hands, frozen hard—still clasped together. Slowly, he pulled his hands apart. Icicles dropped off, hit the ground, and shattered. Bit by little bit, he opened his hands up.

But there was nothing there. The whirling snow stuck to his gray palms and colored them white. Was it all an illusion? A brief dream he'd had in the freezing storm?

No. A tiny point of light, smaller than a single ice crystal, shone faintly in the center of his palm.

Shik, shik. It flickered on a definite cycle, like a beacon to guide travelers through the blizzard. Or like the pulsing of a heart.

Curling up his hand to protect the spot of light from the cold, Haruyuki gently exhaled. The flashing gradually grew faster. The cycle of once per second became three times...and then ten. Finally, Haruyuki's eye was no longer able to perceive the amplitude as it stabilized into a state of continuous light.

The light puffed out to become a ring about two centimeters across. Below the ring, a long, slender spindle appeared. And then two small wings stretched out from either side of that. The entire thing was tinged with a milky-white light.

There was no way he was seeing wrong. This was the three-dimensional icon of Metatron that had guided Haruyuki in the Acceleration Research Society headquarters. Was it the real thing? Or a momentary vision produced by his imagination?

Ever so timidly, he moved his hand to gently stroke the spindle with his index finger. He touched it. It had substance. And a hazy heat that penetrated the core of his body.

"...Meta. Tron...," he said in a shaking voice, going to touch the icon again.

"Such...insolence!!"

A powerful scolding voice slammed into the center of his brain, and Haruyuki reeled, landing on his backside. The icon slipped from his palm and began to hover about ten centimeters above his head, vibrating its wings.

"Do you think a servant such as yourself is permitted to touch me in such a fashion, Silver Crow?! As punishment for this rude act, I shall extend your period of service to me by five hundred years!!"

"....."

For a moment, he stared up at the icon, dumbfounded. And then abruptly, his field of view warped. Beneath his goggles, he felt hot liquid spilling from his eye lenses. These fell from the bottom of his face mask and instantly melted the snow piled up on his avatar's armor. The hot tears welled up one after another.

It wasn't a vision. Just as the mysterious voice had told him, she hadn't vanished. The details of the logic weren't clear, but the link with Haruyuki had remained, and on the brink of extinction, Metatron's spirit had been revived by his activation of that circuit.

Unable to speak, he simply let the tears spill from his eyes, and Metatron's tone softened just a little.

“At any rate, it should have been possible to guess that I had evaded complete extinction at the point when the wings I loaned you remained even after the link was cut. To begin with, it's quite impossible for me to disappear in a battle with an enemy on that level. You are my servant; understand at least the scale of your master's power. However, that said, I shall commend you on being able to reestablish the link with me. Unfortunately, at the moment, I am unable to bestow a proper reward...”

That was the limit. Unable to hold back the emotions that swelled up in him, Haruyuki reached out, wrapped his arms around the icon, and hugged it to his chest.



“Ah! Come now! What are you doing?!”

Feeling fond of the vibration of the small wings and the hazy warmth of the light, he murmured, “Welcome back, Metatron. I’m so glad that you’re...you’re...” He managed to get that far somehow, but his sobs got in the way, and the rest of his sentence failed to become words.

As the storm started to calm, he curled into a ball on top of the ice and wept. He sobbed out loud like a small child. The vibration in the palm of his hand changed to a gentle pulsation, as if she had resigned herself to this indignity or to soothe him, and the spindle got a little hotter. The gentle warmth eased the pain in his injured hands.

Without noticing that the snow had stopped at some point, the sun shining through gaps in the thick clouds, Haruyuki continued to cry for a long time.

(The End)

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 16: Snow White's Slumber*. I had a hazy image of the scene in this volume where Snow White, aka Shirayukihime, appears back when I was writing the first volume, *Kuroyukihime's Return*. Volume 1 was published in February 2009, but I submitted it for the fifteenth Dengeki Novel Prize with a deadline of April of the previous year, so I actually started writing it in the fall of 2007. In other words (counting on my fingers)...that was more than six years ago at the moment when I am writing this afterword in December 2013, hmm?

When I was writing the manuscript for the first volume, although I imagined where the story would end up, I had neither the will nor the intention to continue writing it up to that point, so I am deeply grateful that I was finally able to make it to *that* scene after the undeserved honor of the prize, having the book published by Dengeki Bunko, being supported by so many readers, and telling this tale for six years and sixteen volumes. *Accel World* is truly a blessed work. I cannot begin to express my gratitude to everyone who's supported me.

...Blah blah blah—I write like it's the last book, but that is absolutely not the case. (*sweats*) And just when the great Shirayukihime/Snow White finally makes an appearance, she basically shows her face and then immediately leaves. And there's still tons of mysteries, all kinds of problems that have just piled up...

The truth is, this isn't the time to get all maudlin, is it? The ISS kit arc that was at last resolved in this volume started in Volume 11, which came out in April 2012, so I've had all of you spending a full year and a half with those black eyeballs. Frighteningly, in the calendar in the story, Volume 11 begins on June 23, 2047, and Volume 16 begins on June 30, so time has only advanced a week over six volumes...And Volume 6, when the Armor of Catastrophe arc started, was on the sixteenth of the same month! No wonder it seemed like it was always raining!

That said, I sincerely apologize for the fact that although I

announced in the afterword of Volume 14 that the arc would end in the next book, it clearly did not—and that the afterword of Volume 15 ended up being two *Accel Lunch* comics. We've finally reached a place where we can take a breath, but the story will still continue. A brighter story in which there is no Armor or eyeballs...or that's the plan anyway. At the very least, I think the rainy season will be over!

Thank you to my illustrator, HIMA, who I always cause problems for as my schedule delays become chronic, and my editors, Miki and Tsuchiya! And all you readers, I look forward to our sixth year together!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in December 2013

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